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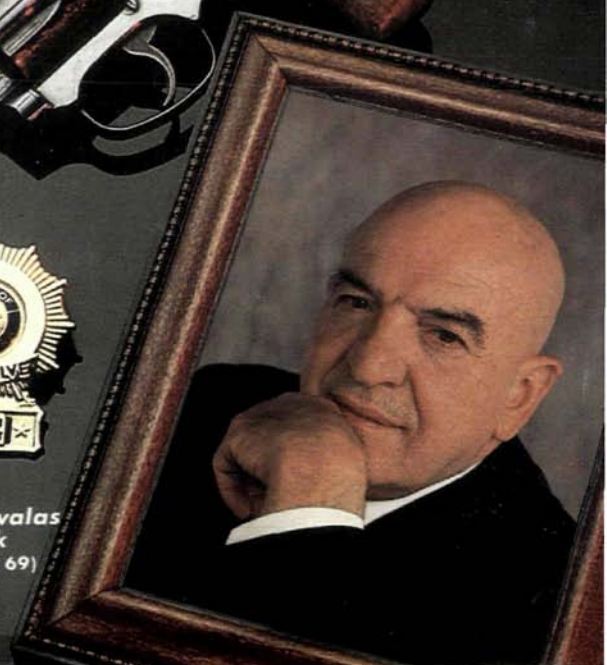

Telly Savalas as Kojak
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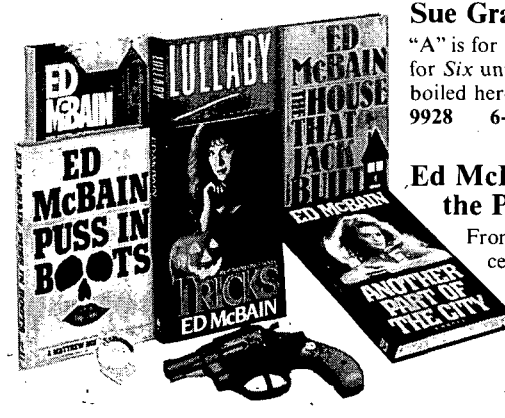

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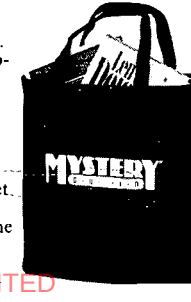

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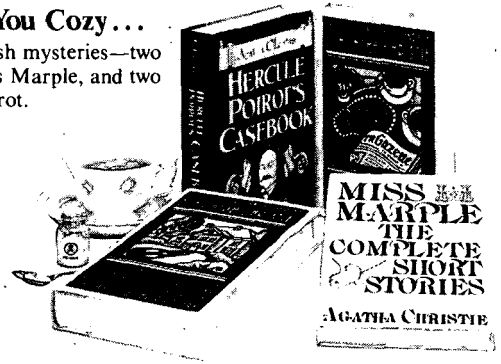

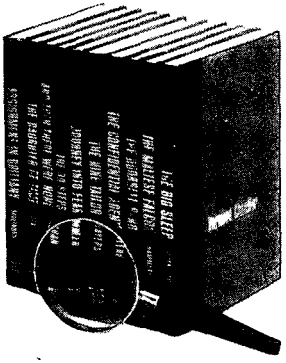

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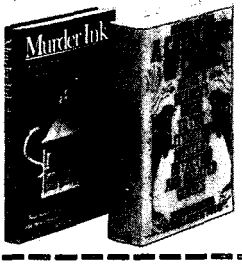

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On our cover is TELLY SAVALAS as Kojak

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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Rosanna took out the sunglasses she'd brought along. It was brighter here, as they drove along the coast with the Mediterranean sun in their eyes. "I hate meeting strangers," she said. "I've never met a Manush Gypsy in my life."

"They're like everyone else," Michael told her. "A bit less honest, perhaps, than the Rom we know from our village, but we have nothing to fear from them. The French police are very strict, and can deport Gypsies for little or no reason . . ."

THE CRYPT OF THE GYPSY SAINT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was in the spring of the year, toward the end of May, that Michael Vlado and his wife Rosanna left their farm home in the foothills of Romania's Transylvanian Alps and headed west across Europe. Michael couldn't remember the last time Rosanna had ventured out of Gravita and he was pleased that she had agreed to accompany him.

"The Gypsy king has certain responsibilities," he'd told her. "One of them is to attend Gypsy festivals and mingle with the other tribes. I have never been to the celebration of St. Sarah, the Gypsy saint, but it is a good opportunity to meet Manush Gypsies from France. It is a long journey from Romania to the south of France. Your company would help me pass the lonely hours on the road."

He hadn't really expected her to say yes, but she could still surprise him at times. A lovely but withdrawn woman who disliked the traditional nomadic ways of her people, Rosanna was quite content to

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carve the little wooden animals to be sold at the village shops, or to tell an occasional fortune for a friend or neighbor. "I never expected to be the wife of a Gypsy king," she'd told him once soon after the members of the tribe had elected him. There were times when he didn't know whether she considered it an honor or a curse.

Their route in Michael's aging car took them across northern Yugoslavia and Italy before crossing into France. The destination he'd circled on his map was the little town of Saintes Maries de la Mer, where the festival was held from May twenty-fourth to twenty-sixth each year. It was west of Marseilles, on the delta of the Rhone River—on the map it appeared to be an almost haphazard conjunction of land and sea.

"Sarah is a saint only among Gypsies," Michael explained as they drove. "The feast is really that of St. Mary Jacobe and St. Mary Salome, the Saintes Maries de la Mer who gave the town its name. Legend has it that these two women, the mothers of the Apostles John and James, landed there after drifting across the Mediterranean from the Holy Land in a tiny boat without oars or sail, accompanied by an Egyptian servant girl named Sarah. During the two-day celebration, Gypsies ride horseback into the sea and form a semicircle to symbolically protect the images of the saints as they're carried ashore through the surf. The two Marys are honored on the first day, and the dark-skinned Sarah on the second. Though the Catholic Church does not recognize her, Sarah has become the patron saint of the Gypsies."

Rosanna took out the sunglasses she'd brought along. It was brighter here, as they drove along the coast with the Mediterranean sun in their eyes. "I hate meeting strangers," she said. "I've never met a Manush Gypsy in my life."

"They're like everyone else," Michael told her. "A bit less honest, perhaps, than the Rom we know from our village, but we have nothing to fear from them. The French police are very strict, and can deport Gypsies for little or no reason."

The highway skirted Marseilles and they turned off at Arles, heading south into the delta area. Suddenly the road grew more crowded, with cars and caravan wagons parked on either side. There were people everywhere, dressed in colorful Gypsy garb, shouting to new arrivals and directing them toward the few remaining parking places.

"The festival doesn't begin until tomorrow!" Rosanna remarked.

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"They say the population of Saintes Maries de la Mer triples during this week. The Gypsies alone will number close to ten thousand."

He looked at Rosanna. She looked sorry that she had agreed to come. "We'll make new friends," he assured her. "I'm to look for Uncle Sabio from Spain. He said he'd be here."

"Is he your real uncle?"

"Among Gypsies, who knows? But my mother had an older brother of that name."

They parked some distance from the town itself and put up the tent they'd brought with them. Already there were guitars playing, and a Gypsy girl in net stockings and a short leopard-skin-print dress was dancing the flamenco. The spectators, especially the men, cheered and clapped their hands in time to the music. Michael asked several of the men where he might find Uncle Sabio. One laughed and replied, "At the roulette tables, back there—away from the church."

Michael and Rosanna proceeded in the direction the man had pointed and presently came to a clearing where a number of caravans were parked. Here a half dozen tables had been arranged for gambling, with roulette and cards awaiting all comers. "I'm looking for Uncle Sabio," Michael told a red-shirted Gypsy behind the first roulette table.

"Sabio!" the man bellowed. "Here is a Rom who calls you uncle!"

A large man at the next table turned and broke into a grin when he recognized Michael. "Ah, it is truly my nephew, come all the way from Romania!" He rose and came to embrace Michael in a bear hug. "You are a king now, Michael! I have heard the news, even in Spain!"

"This is my wife, Rosanna," said Michael.

Uncle Sabio freed an arm to embrace her, too. "Are there any little ones yet? No? A Gypsy wife must supply many children, Rosanna."

Seeing his wife blush, Michael quickly said, "Tell us about yourself, Uncle Sabio. Are you running a gambling game at a religious feast?"

"You mean it is never done? They tell me in America even the churches have gambling at their festivals. Here, at least, we remain a proper distance away." He raised a hand. "But enough talk. A Gypsy king from far away deserves a fitting tribute, especially when he is my nephew."

Before Michael knew what was happening, an impromptu party

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had organized around himself and Rosanna. There was music and singing and wild Gypsy dancing that went on into the evening. Rom men and women from other tribes wandered back and forth, drinking with Michael and wishing him well. At one point he remembered Rosanna cautioning him that he was drinking too much.

As darkness descended on the encampment, Uncle Sabio appeared with his bearlike arm around a young Gypsy girl wearing a short leopard-print dress—she was the one Michael had noticed dancing earlier. "This is Carla, one of the best dancers I've ever seen," he said. "Carla, meet Michael Vlado, king of the Gravita tribe in Romania."

"Hello," she said, extending her hand. Michael guessed her to be about nineteen or twenty. She had dark skin, expressive brown eyes, and untamed black hair that hung to her shoulders.

"Where are you from?" Michael asked her as the music began again.

"The Quento Tkalaya settlement in Barcelona. Have you ever been there?"

"Never."

"There is much dancing among young Barcelona Gypsies. Sometimes I work in a nightclub where American tourists pay to see the flamenco."

As if to give meaning to her words, she began a wild dance in time to the throbbing guitars. Watching her made Michael feel young again.

In the morning, with a painful hangover, he wasn't feeling so young. Rosanna dragged him out of his sleeping bag before eight o'clock so they wouldn't be late to witness the symbolic landing of the two Marys. The crowd of Gypsies and tourists was so thick, they saw nothing of Uncle Sabio for much of the morning. Making their way to the beach, they found a score of Rom horsemen mounted on white steeds, many with wooden poles resembling lances, forming a semicircle in the shallow water just offshore.

"They're acting as a sort of honor guard for the saints," a man explained, aiming a camera at the sight.

Michael introduced himself and asked the man's name.

"I'm only a tourist. Guy Lichand from Paris. I try to get down every year for this." He was a slender man in his thirties with a receding hairline and a pleasant manner.

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"Do you bring your family?" Rosanna asked as they stood watching the ritual from the beach.

"Alas, I'm divorced, and without children."

"Do we go into the water now?" Michael asked him as swarms of onlookers began to make their way through the surf.

"Only if you wish. The show can be seen better from here."

And he was right. The statues of the two Marys, borne aloft in a small flower-filled boat by white-robed altar boys, were submerged three times and then carried triumphantly back to shore. Behind them, banners unfurled and people by the hundreds followed along. The entire procession from the sea was led by a stout local man carrying a flower-covered cross with a banner attached. Several in the crowd called out, "Henri!" as he passed.

"It is supposed to have happened like this in 42 A.D.," Guy Lichand told Rosanna and Michael, "when the mothers of John and James completed their voyage from the Holy Land. A pretty legend."

"Why is Saint Sarah not honored with them?" Rosanna wanted to know, though Michael thought he'd explained it to her.

"Ah, she is a Gypsy saint only. Even the church over there keeps her statue hidden away in a candle-heated crypt for most of the year while the other two are displayed in the church itself. Notre Dame de la Mer. Our Lady of the Sea. The Church believes it was the Blessed Virgin who saved their lives and brought them into port, not a Gypsy girl named Sarah."

The procession was winding slowly up from the shoreline to the small Romanesque church nearby. Michael and Rosanna followed along, crowding into the stone-walled structure, whose interior was now lit by hundreds of candle flames. In the crush, Michael managed to keep hold of Rosanna's hand, keeping her close to him, but the Frenchman was lost from view.

It was after the church service as the crowd broke into smaller groups that they came upon Uncle Sabio. "Michael!" he shouted, coming forward to greet them. "You must come this afternoon—I am having a gathering of all the tribal kings at my encampment."

Michael's head still ached. "Not another excuse for drinking, I hope. We lead a more sober existence back home. I'm not sure I can take it."

"You are a king now. You have responsibilities to your people."

"All right," Michael told him. "I'll be there."

"Three o'clock."

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Rosanna and Michael spent some time wandering in the town, where the streets were crowded with tourists and Gypsies. "And we have to go through all this again tomorrow," Rosanna sighed.

"Tomorrow it will be for Sarah," Michael said.

When they arrived at Sabio's great tent in midafternoon, Michael saw that a number of the other kings were in attendance. Some from eastern Europe he knew from a regional gathering he'd attended before he was king, but most were strangers to him.

His uncle introduced one tribal leader from Spain, Gangio Kalo, who was there with his wife Esmeralda, a tall, strikingly handsome woman Rosanna immediately warmed to. She wore a long black gown that swept along the ground as she walked and dangling brass earrings that tugged at her earlobes.

The occasion was mainly social, but Michael had learned his lesson the previous night. He drank little, and when interest shifted to the games of chance he told Gangio Kalo he and Rosanna would be leaving soon, they must be up early in the morning to pay tribute to the Gypsy saint.

"Stay a bit for another glass of wine," Gangio insisted.

Michael declined. One glass of the foul-tasting liquid had been enough for him. As they moved away, Rosanna said, "Oh, there's Carla—the dancer."

Carla, still wearing her leopard-print dress, spied Michael and Rosanna and embraced them with delight. "Have you heard the news? I'm one of the girls chosen to carry Black Sarah out of her crypt to the sea, and then back again."

Michael shared in her enthusiasm. "That's a great honor."

"There are only four of us." She ran on to tell Uncle Sabio and the others.

Michael smiled, looking after her. "She's a fine young woman. She'll make someone a good wife."

Rosanna sniffed. "I don't think she's interested in being a wife just yet."

On their way back along the road to their own tent, they encountered the Frenchman, Guy Lichand.

"You're staying for tomorrow's celebration?" Rosanna asked.

"Of course," he said. "Black Sarah is really what this festival is all about."

He offered to buy them a drink at the cafe in town, but Michael declined. It was already dark and the morning would come early . . .

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The first thing he heard after he awoke was Rosanna calling his name. "Michael, get up. It's daylight and people are starting for the shore already."

"All right," he said. "All right."

If anything, the crowd was larger than on the previous morning, but as they neared the shore they felt a difference. The shouts of triumph from the previous day had been replaced by a low, uncertain murmur. Then Michael saw the reason for it. Offshore about a hundred feet, a small boat without sail or oars bobbed in the surf. A dark-skinned woman in a white gown sat upright against the bare mast. "That's no statue," he said, tightening his hold on Rosanna's arm, "it's a real woman."

"It's Black Sarah come to life," someone murmured.

No one was anxious to move. Even the Gypsy horsemen reined their white steeds in close to shore. It was Michael who finally broke into a run, pushing the crowd aside and splashing through the surf. The water was up to his waist by the time he reached the boat.

By that time he had recognized the young woman in the white gown. It was the dancer, Carla. Her neck had been tied to the boat's mast to keep her upright. She'd been strangled with a leather thong.

"Who would do such a terrible thing?" Uncle Sabio demanded, thumping the sand with his walking stick as Carla's body was brought ashore.

"She was our Saint Sarah," Gangio Kalo proclaimed, but his tall, imposing wife was quick to correct him.

"She was only a poor Gypsy girl, murdered by some man."

"Who would take the trouble to dress her like that and push the boat out to sea?" Uncle Sabio asked. "The murderer must have known it wouldn't drift away. Is it some ritual killing by an enemy of Gypsies?"

The local police had arrived to take charge, but no Gypsy seemed willing to speak with them. It was Michael and Rosanna, finally, who told them what they knew, describing their brief encounters with the murdered girl. The police officer took notes, but asked virtually no questions, and Michael suspected the death of this Gypsy girl from another country would not be pursued with any real vigor.

After the police departed with Carla's body, Uncle Sabio asked, "What about the ceremony? We have come to honor our saint."

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There was general agreement that the ceremony must go on, and Gangio Kalo went off to find the priest.

He proved to be a bearded French cleric named Father Andre, who deplored the killing and tried to impress the crowd with his openness toward Gypsies. "My little church has always been open to all," he said, "and we have kept the statue of Sarah in our underground crypt from one year to the next. But you understand that the Catholic Church does not recognize her as a saint, so she cannot be honored with the Marys."

"Of course," Michael agreed. "But we would like to continue the ceremony now, as it would have been this morning."

"Very well," said the priest.

"Could I see the crypt?"

"Certainly."

The others waited outside while Michael followed the bearded priest down the worn stone steps to the underground crypt. Candles burned here, too—hundreds of them—and he saw that the two-foot-high statue of the Black Sarah was gowned and ready for her round-trip journey to the sea. Michael reached out to touch her in the candlelight. "The Gypsy saint," he said softly.

"Perhaps one day she really will be that," the priest agreed.

"Do you have a fourth girl to replace Carla in carrying her to the sea?"

"Yes. There is one from our own parish. She is half Gypsy, and a perfect choice. We will commence within the hour."

They were joined then by the stout man Michael had seen leading the procession back from the sea the previous morning, carrying the flower-covered cross. He remembered the man's name was Henri, and Father Andre introduced him as Henri Pueter, a church councilman. He was instructed to round up the Gypsy horsemen and toll the church bell to summon the pilgrims to the beach.

Outside, Michael shielded his eyes against the brightness of the noonday sun as he gazed up at the belfry while the sound of the bell echoed over the land and water. Most of the crowd had never left the beach, and a cheer went up at the news that the ceremony would begin shortly.

The Gypsy horsemen, wearing dark coats and a variety of hats, rode once more into the shallow water, forming a semicircle. Four Gypsy girls carried the miniature boat with its statue of the Black Sarah, wading into the water up to their knees and then submerging

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it three times before returning to shore. Swarms of Gypsies fell in behind them, forming a procession that seemed even larger than on the previous day. Michael knew they were all remembering Carla at that moment. Carla, whose last name he'd never known. Carla, who'd danced the flamenco. Their own Black Sarah.

Later, when the celebration had shifted to Uncle Sabio's gaming tables—Sabio, wearing a billowing blue-silk shirt that caught the light, busy behind the roulette wheel, his white hair framing his face like a halo—Michael decided to slip away, leaving Rosanna chatting with Guy Lichand.

Outside, just as the church came into view against the evening sky, a slim figure in black intercepted Michael. It was Esmeralda, Kalo's wife. "Where are you hurrying, Michael?" she asked him.

"I wanted to speak with Father Andre," he answered truthfully.

"Come walk on the beach with me. It is a lovely night."

He couldn't deny that. "For a few minutes," he agreed.

Michael had to take long strides to keep in step with her, especially on the loose sand. "What part of Spain are you from?" he asked as they walked.

"We've recently been living at an encampment outside Barcelona."

"Did you know the murdered girl? She was from that area."

"We may have seen her at the dance festivals, but I don't remember her. There are a great many Gypsies in the Quento Tkalaya settlement. Isn't that where she was from?"

Michael nodded. "That's what she told me." They walked on and he asked, "How long have you and Gangio been married?"

She laughed. "It is an informal marriage. There was no ceremony."

"I see."

"I've been with him two years now. We are more settled than most. Gangio is an industrious man, willing to work rather than beg or steal, like so many Roms."

"Do you think a Rom killed Carla?"

"Who knows? There are enough tourists here but the police will surely blame it on a Gypsy. They always do."

"I must see the priest," Michael said. "Perhaps we'll talk again later."

"I hope so." He could see her smile in the near-darkness. It was a Gypsy smile, offering all but signifying nothing.

The church was dark but Michael saw a light in the rectory next

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door. He knocked, and after a moment Father Andre opened the door. "Who is it?" the bearded cleric asked.

"Michael Vlado, Father. We met earlier."

"Come in, my son. I can hear from the music that the festival is still in progress."

"Forgive me if I'm not fluent in your language."

"You do very well. How can I help you?"

"Was it you who chose Carla as one of the girls to carry the Black Sarah?"

"No. We have a parish councilman who handles these matters. He cleans and prepares the crypt each year, chooses the girls, and takes charge of the secular portions of the festival. His name is Henri Pueter."

"Yes," Michael said. "The man who led yesterday's procession. Where might I find him?"

"He was doing some work in the crypt earlier. You might look there. The festival concludes tomorrow with a service there, and Henri was replacing the burnt-out candles with new ones." It was warm inside the rectory and he wiped his brow as he spoke.

"Has there ever been trouble like this at a festival before?"

"You mean a killing? Never. Occasionally Gypsy passions and overindulgence in drink might lead to a knife fight over some woman, but there has never been a serious injury. The people come here to celebrate their saint."

Michael moved to the door. "Thank you for your time, Father. I'll take a look in the crypt as you suggest. Is it lit at night?"

"Tonight it will be lit by a thousand candles. You will have no trouble seeing."

Michael found the crypt much as it had been earlier in the day when he visited it with Father Andre. There were more candles now and the glow was brighter, but the Black Sarah still stood alone in her niche, gowned in several layers of colorful cloth. There was a plain wooden cross next to the statue and the flickering candles cast its shadow across the slightly curved ceiling. The effect was to cause a gentle ripple to the shadows of the statue and the cross, as if viewing them through the shallow waters outside.

Michael heard a slight sound and turned to his right. The stocky bald man was kneeling in one of the other niches, his head bowed. "Mr. Pueter?" Michael addressed him, reluctant to interrupt his prayer.

There was no answer. Michael went over and touched his shoulder.

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Henri Pueter started sliding to the floor. Michael had only an instant to realize he was dead before something hit the back of his head and a shower of light exploded before his eyes.

When he opened his eyes, he could make out two blurred figures crouching above him in the candlelight. As his vision cleared, he recognized Father Andre and Gangio Kalo. The priest was holding Michael's head and wiping it with a bloodstained cloth. "Can you hear me?" he asked Michael.

"I—yes. What happened?"

"Gangio saw someone running away from the crypt. When we investigated, we found poor Henri dead and you unconscious."

Michael gingerly touched the back of his head. "How long have I been out?"

"You left the rectory about twenty minutes ago."

Michael rolled over and sat up, holding his aching head. He saw a slim brass candlestick on the floor of the crypt. "Lucky it wasn't heavier or I'd be with Henri now." Staring at the man's body sprawled on the floor, he could now see the cause of death. He had been strangled with a cord, just like the girl.

The two men helped Michael to his feet. Except for a throbbing head, he seemed to be all right. "What did you see?" he asked Kalo.

"I was coming looking for you. As I neared the crypt, I saw someone running out."

"A man or a woman?"

"I think a man, but I can't be sure. I called to him but he kept on running. That was when Father Andre heard me and came outside. We came into the crypt to look for you and found this."

"Two killings in one day," the priest said. "How can it be, in our quiet little community?"

"It's not quiet or little this week," Michael reminded him. "Tell me about Henri Pueter. Did he have a family? Who were his friends?"

"A wife who's been ill in a nursing home, no one else. And all of us were his friends. He often had visitors from out of town."

"Gypsies?"

"There are none in the area, except at festival time."

"Something must have linked Pueter and the girl. From the look of that cord, they were both killed by the same person."

The priest nodded sadly. "I must summon the police."

As he went to do that, Michael remembered something. "Why were you looking for me?" he asked Kalo.

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The Spanish Gypsy glanced around, as if fearful they'd be overheard. "We've known each other only a day, Michael, but one king has a responsibility to another. When you went away, I saw a Frenchman make advances toward your woman."

"*What?* What Frenchman?"

"Guy Lichand, the one with the camera."

"And you came to tell me this?"

Kalo nodded. "If it was Esmeralda I would have cut out his black heart."

Michael knew there could be no truth to it, and yet he also realized he had left Rosanna alone far too long in the company of strangers. Telling Gangio Kalo to wait there for the police, he left the crypt and set off down the dark road. The Gypsy encampments grew noisier as he moved farther from the church, guided by the bonfires blazing on both sides of the road. Finally he heard the familiar sounds of gamblers cheering at the drop of a roulette ball and the turn of a card. He was back in Uncle Sabio's domain.

Moving quickly among the tables, he saw Esmeralda and paused as she reached for a small leather pouch that hung from her neck and poured a half dozen small emeralds onto the gaming table. He watched as she won and replaced the emeralds in the pouch, smiling at Sabio in his shimmering white shirt.

But there was no sign of Rosanna at the tables, nor had Uncle Sabio seen her recently. Guy Lichand was missing, too. His frustration mounting, Michael headed back through the woods toward their own tent. There was a good chance she'd grown bored and gone to bed early. He tried not to think of the other possibilities as he detoured around a Gypsy couple making love behind some bushes.

Then he heard her voice—a few words, a laugh. He hurried forward, and must have looked like a madman as he burst through the bushes into the firelight.

Rosanna was seated crosslegged on the ground, chatting with two of the other Gypsy women. She looked up, startled, and leaped to her feet. "Michael, what happened to you? There's blood on—"

"I'm all right. What about you? Kalo came looking for me and said Lichand was molesting you."

"That was nothing. It happened just after you left. The music got a bit wild and he grabbed me and hugged me. I broke away and decided it was time to come back here."

"Did he follow you?"

"No. That's all there was to it."

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"Still, he deserves a good beating."

She looked suddenly alarmed. "No, Michael! Promise me you won't start any trouble with him!"

"Why not?"

She glanced around at the other women, who were deep in conversation, and lowered her voice. "When he hugged me, I felt something under his jacket. I think he's carrying a gun."

The final day of the festival opened with a procession of Gypsies through the streets of the town to the small church of Notre Dame de la Mer. There, in the crypt of their own Saint Sarah, they lined up to pass before the statue and touch its garments. Outside, as a reminder of the two violent deaths the previous day, uniformed police officers stood by their vehicles. Rosanna had joined the procession, but Michael stood to one side with Uncle Sabio.

"I have never known such a thing in all my years of coming to Saintes Maries de la Mer. The place is swarming with police."

"Two people have died," Michael reminded him.

"They say Henri Pueter killed the girl and then committed suicide out of remorse."

"By strangling himself with a cord? I don't think so."

"What, then?"

"Did the Gypsies have any dealings with Pueter? He lived here and worked around the church. He must have played an active part in the festival planning."

"I don't know. I have seen him through the years, but I was never friendly with him."

Michael sighed. "What did you do last night? Were you on the gaming tables all evening?"

"Of course. Do you think I leave that to others? I walk away for five minutes and there are Roms to steal me blind."

"What about Kalo's woman, Esmeralda? I saw her gambling with emeralds. Did she do that all evening?"

"Off and on. At a gathering like this from many lands, it's not unusual for Gypsies to gamble with gold or precious gems. Most Gypsies prefer them to currency, especially when moving from country to country. Foreign exchange involves one with the authorities."

"Did Esmeralda bring the emeralds with her or had she won them earlier?"

"Let me think. She started gambling with some French francs, and was winning small amounts. She brought out the gems as it

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was growing dark. She used them again a second time around ten o'clock."

"That was when I saw her. She had them around her neck all this time, in the leather pouch? She didn't go off to her tent or wagon for them?"

"No, she had them with her. She stayed at the table all evening."

"What about Guy Lichand?"

"Is he the Frenchman who has been taking pictures? He didn't gamble. That one is more interested in dancing with our women."

As if on cue, Michael spotted Lichand moving through the crowd toward the entrance to the crypt. He wore a 35 mm. camera on a strap over one shoulder. Michael left Uncle Sabio's side and followed him.

The inside of the crypt was thick with the heat and odor of the crowd. The candles had burned low, but there was still enough illumination to see the columns of worshipers moving patiently toward the statue of Sarah. Michael watched Gangio Kalo touch the statue and leave a few gold coins in the growing pile before it. Then Esmeralda moved up to take his place.

That was when Lichand's hand came out from under his coat holding a short Beretta automatic. Michael waited no longer. He hurled himself forward, yanking down the arm with the gun, propelling the Frenchman forward as people scrambled out of their way. They hit the hard earthen floor of the crypt together, the impact sending new waves of pain through Michael's already battered head. The weapon flew free of Lichand's grasp and was grabbed up immediately by one of the Gypsy youths.

"You fool!" Lichand shouted at Michael. "Let me up—I'm a police officer!"

It took some minutes for the turmoil to die down. Lichand flashed his identification and the youth quickly surrendered his pistol. The frightened crowd began to thin out rapidly. Those nearest the door, who'd seen Lichand identify himself as a police officer, hastily retreated up the steps to daylight. Lichand himself hurried forward with the pistol to intercept the person he'd been after. Michael pushed through after him.

It was Esmeralda the Frenchman finally fastened on, grabbing her by the shoulder and producing a pair of handcuffs. "Please come with me," he told her as Michael reached them. "You're under arrest."

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"Are you charging her with the killings?" Michael asked.

Lichand grabbed at the leather pouch around her neck. "I'm charging her with illegal traffic in precious gems. There may be additional charges later."

Father Andre had appeared, his cassock billowing behind him. "What's the meaning of this? You have these people in a panic!"

"If we can use your rectory, Father," Lichand said, "I'll be happy to explain everything."

A half dozen of them trooped over to Father Andre's house, leaving the rest of the Gypsies to mill about, uncertain of what was happening. Gangio Kalo came along to be with Esmeralda, now handcuffed to Lichand's wrist. Behind Michael were Uncle Sabio and Rosanna. The priest settled into a leather armchair and asked, "Now then, what's this all about?"

"I am Detective-Inspector Guy Lichand of the Paris police, on temporary duty at Marseilles. We have suspected for some time that a series of jewel thefts from salesmen and wholesalers could be traced to Gypsy involvement. The thefts have covered a period of the past two years and fit a distinct pattern. They reached their peak during the busy Christmas-holiday season each year, but the stolen gems simply seemed to vanish. No attempt was made to fence them, at least not in France. Last year, however, we noticed something unusual. During the summer, some of the stolen jewels started turning up in various spots across Europe, especially in Spain, Italy, and the Balkans. It was as if they'd been held somewhere and then distributed through an elaborate system of fences in late spring. We managed to trace two of the packets of stolen gems back to Gypsies in Spain and Italy. I tried to trace any common contact they might have had in May or June and came up with the festival of St. Sarah. This year I decided to investigate it for myself, posing as a photographer."

"Did that involve embracing my wife?" Michael asked.

Lichand was unfazed by Michael's tone. "I've embraced a number of women in the past two days. It's an effective way of determining whether they're carrying pouches of gems under their peasant blouses."

"Why did you arrest Esmeralda?"

"She was gambling with emeralds at Sabio's wheel last night. I think those emeralds came from Henri Pueter. He was the man who bought the stolen gems and used the festival to resell them to Gyp-

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sies from all over Europe. It was a clever scheme, but it led to two deaths."

"Are you saying that Esmeralda killed him? My Uncle Sabio can testify that she never left the gaming table. And why was the girl killed?"

"I haven't yet worked that out," Lichand admitted. "I think she must have seen something."

Gangio Kalo spoke. "Esmeralda didn't steal anything. She always carries a pouch of emeralds because of her name. It's from the Greek word for emerald. Ask any of our friends."

"Why did you draw your gun just now?" Michael asked the detective. "Why pick that moment to arrest Esmeralda?"

"The jewels were in pouches under the statue's garments. The Gypsies removed them as they touched the garments."

"And of course the Roms who weren't entitled to pouches simply left them in place for the others to take. You have an odd idea of Gypsy ethics, Inspector."

One of the uniformed officers who'd been on guard outside entered the rectory to report. "They've found no sign of jewels in the crypt, Inspector. There was nothing hidden under or around the statue."

Lichand's frustration was beginning to show. "I'm still taking you in for questioning," he told Esmeralda.

"I'm going with you," Kalo said.

Uncle Sabio was very disturbed. He turned to the priest and asked, "Isn't there something you can do, Padre? These are innocent people."

"I'll do what I can," the priest promised.

Michael and Rosanna followed Uncle Sabio out of the rectory. "I need to speak with him alone," Michael told his wife. "Wait for me at the tent."

He caught up with his uncle, who was some distance ahead, walking fast, shaking his head angrily. "I never thought they'd try to blame it all on Esmeralda."

"Perhaps it's time you told them the truth," Michael said quietly.

Sabio jerked his head sideways. "And what is the truth?"

"That it's you who sells the stolen gems to the Gypsies, and it was you who killed Pueter and the girl."

Uncle Sabio stared at Michael. "I knew it when I first saw you that you would be trouble. I knew it again last night when you almost discovered me in the crypt. I should have killed you as I did

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the others, but something stayed my hand as I swung the candlestick and it was only a glancing blow. Perhaps I was remembering your mother."

"Your baby sister," Michael said. "That's what made me think of you. I was trying to determine who among everyone here might have spared my life when it would have been so easy to kill me."

"Much of what the detective concluded is true," Sabio said. "But the statue had nothing to do with it. Black Sarah is revered by Gypsies everywhere. No one would use her in such a manner."

"No," Michael agreed. "You used your roulette and card games to distribute the gems. It was easy enough to take a certain amount in seeming losses from the proper players and then pay off their winnings with the stolen jewels. It was all carefully arranged beforehand, and it was done before scores of witnesses. Even Inspector Lichand watched the games for a time without realizing what was happening."

"He was too busy hugging Gypsy women."

"Did you know he was a detective?"

Sabio shrugged. "No, but it would have made no difference. Pueter was my contact here for the stolen gems. I was merely a wholesaler, reselling to my Gypsy retailers who fanned out across Europe. That girl, Carla, came upon Pueter and me in the crypt. She saw the jewels and was smart enough to realize they must be stolen. She wanted some to keep quiet. I lost my head and strangled her with the leather thong from the neck of one of the larger pouches.

"Pueter helped me get the body into the boat so it would look like some sort of ritual killing, but then his conscience bothered him and he said he would have to confess to Father Andre. So I had to kill him, too."

"There's no end to it unless you stop right now," Michael told him.

"How did you know for certain it was me?"

"The fact that the killer let me live. The jewels I'd observed at the gaming table. And then there was your insistence that you hadn't left the roulette wheel all evening, during the period when Pueter was killed and I was knocked out. You must have left it because you were wearing a blue-silk shirt early in the evening and a white one later on. What happened—did some of my blood spatter onto your blue shirt?"

Uncle Sabio gazed at him sadly. "You are a wise man, Michael. You will make a good king."

"I will have to tell the police, Uncle."

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"Give me a few minutes first."

Michael went back to their tent and spoke with Rosanna. He was still with her when Father Andre, his face tragic, brought him word that his uncle had climbed to the top of the church belfry and thrown himself to the ground.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

THE RANSOM

by JAMES HOLDING

Said a rich retail jeweler named Weiss,
Who was kidnaped by "Greedy Boy" Rice:
"If you'll listen to me
And at once set me free,
I'll give you a jewel of great price."

Rice answered, "You think I'm a fool?
It is cash I demand, not a jewel!"
Weiss said, "It's worth more
Than the rest of my store—"
And his kidnaper started to drool.

"Are you kidding?" he asked Mr. Weiss.
"Will it honestly bring a great price?
If I find it's that handsome,
I'll make it your ransom—
So let's have a look at this ice."

He put up his gun and his knife,
Then got the surprise of his life—
For the jewel of great price
He was offered by Weiss
Turned out to be Ruby, his wife.

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a *NEW* short story by

JUNE THOMSON

Raymond was thinking about taking up squash. In fact, he thought about taking up a lot of activities but never quite got around to doing any of them. Mostly he watched television in the evenings and at weekends or, if the weather was fine, went jogging, but not very often. He felt too conspicuous in his blue tracksuit—too hollow-chested, with knees and elbows that seemed to jut out awkwardly.

June Thomson has said: "I am interested in the personality of the outsider—the person who doesn't quite fit in with his environment." And, we must add, to the greatest effect in this story . . .

WRONG NUMBER

by JUNE THOMSON

It would have been sensible of Raymond Armitage to arrange to have the telephone taken away, or at least disconnected. After all, he really had very little use for it. But when he signed the lease for the furnished apartment—euphemistically called a "garden flat" but in reality a basement bedsitter with a minute kitchen and bathroom opening off the downstairs passage—the telephone was already installed and he hadn't liked to ask for it to be removed. He might need it one day—if, for example, he found himself a girl friend. London was teeming with young women. He saw them all the time, coming out of the offices in Holborn where he worked or sitting opposite him in the tube train or walking in the park where sometimes on Sundays he went jogging.

Beautiful, some of them, too—especially in summer, with their bare arms and long brown legs—although he would have settled for

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someone less pretty, or positively plain if there were no other choice. The only problem was meeting any of them.

Circumstances were against him. The solicitor's office where he worked, tucked away down a side street off Kingsway, was small, staffed only by the two elderly partners, Mr. Luckham and Mr. Brand, and their middle-aged secretaries, a school dropout called Dennis who made the tea and ran errands, and himself as chief clerk. No bare-armed beauties there.

And then there was his appearance. Studying his face in the mirror over the basin in the tiny bathroom, Armitage was forced to admit in his more honest moments that it was unlikely to inspire romantic longings in anyone. It was an odd face: long and thin, as if as a baby his head had been clamped between two boards; the eyes too small; the chin too large; and already, at only twenty-six, his hair was beginning to recede, further lengthening his features and making him look middle-aged before his time.

Meanwhile, the telephone, which sat on the table under the window—through which he had a view of the backyard dustbins —remained obstinately silent. No one rang him and there was nobody he could call except an aunt in Bradford. His mother had no phone. Instead, he wrote her dutiful weekly letters, mostly about the weather and the small happenings which made up his daily life—Mr. Luckham's secretary was off work with a heavy cold, he'd gone to see the latest Dustin Hoffman film, he was thinking of taking up squash.

In fact, he thought about taking up a lot of activities but never quite got round to doing any of them. Mostly he watched television in the evenings and at weekends or, if the weather was fine, went jogging, but not very often. He felt too conspicuous in his blue tracksuit—too hollow-chested, with knees and elbows that seemed to jut out awkwardly. People turned to look, but merely with amusement.

Then one evening, the phone rang. Scrambling across the room to answer it, he heard an unfamiliar female voice ask for David, a note of surprised disappointment in her tone that it wasn't David who had picked up the receiver.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I think you've got the wrong number."

She, too, apologized and rang off.

Replacing his own receiver more slowly, Raymond himself felt disappointed and curiously bereft. The girl had sounded so eager when she'd spoken the unknown man's name. *"David?"* There had been a wealth of meaning in the word.

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He wondered who David was and why the girl had been so anxious to contact him.

Had they quarreled? Was she ringing to make it up with him?

Absurd though it was, he found himself envying David and his good fortune in finding someone out there, among all those millions of people, who cared enough to want to talk to him.

But the incident, trivial though it might seem, had given him an idea.

The telephone was there. What was to stop him from ringing up anyone he liked? His excuse was ready-made. He could pretend he had dialed a wrong number.

He began tentatively at first, simply using the code for his own exchange and then selecting at random any four numbers to follow it. If a man answered, he rang off at once. But quite often a woman picked up the receiver.

The first time this happened he was flustered and hadn't known how to continue.

"Yes? Who is it?" the woman demanded, annoyed at his silence.

Then, remembering his own telephone call, he said, "Can I speak to David?"

"There's no David here," she retorted.

"Sorry," he said humbly. "I must have got the wrong number."

But after that initial rebuff, he grew more confident and adventurous. He pretended to be David, assuming the type of voice he imagined the original, real David might possess—slightly deeper than his own, with a drawling, almost lazy undertone.

He still hung up on the men, but when a woman answered he'd say, "Hello—it's David."

It was surprising how many of them knew a David. Sometimes he'd have quite a long conversation before the woman at the other end of the line realized he wasn't the David she thought he was.

If they said, "Do I know you?" he'd make up some story about having met them at a party or having been introduced to them in a pub. That usually made them flustered and, hearing the uncertainty in their voices, he grew even more confident.

"I'm sorry, I don't think I remember—" they'd begin apologetically, anxious not to give offense, at which he'd reply, "But I remember *you*. You were the woman with the lovely legs."

As time went by, he grew bolder still.

"You're the one with the beautiful figure," he'd say. Or the bed-

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room eyes. Or the sexy mouth. "I'd love to go to bed with you. How about tonight?"

Usually, after a startled gasp, they'd hang up on him. But sometimes they answered back.

"You must be sick," they'd tell him. Out of his skull. One woman even offered him the telephone number of her psychiatrist.

At first he minded about the insults but eventually he got used to them. After all, it was only a game.

It was a game, moreover, which could be played with several variations.

When a man answered the phone, rather than waste the call, Raymond would pretend to be a foreigner with a limited knowledge of English. That was amusing. So, too, were the threats. For these, he assumed a rasping, uneducated voice. "Listen," he'd growl down the phone, "I know all about you. Pack it in or I'll be round there to shove your face through the back of your head."

Sometimes, to add a little variation, he'd look up a name and number in the phonebook. This gave the calls a greater intimacy, knowing whom he was addressing.

He chose the name Packard purely by chance. He happened to be running his finger casually down the "P" section in the telephone directory when he came to the entry for L. B. Packard with a Hampstead number. Initials were always a better bet than a man's name. That way he had a fifty-fifty chance that a woman would answer the phone. Besides, the address intrigued him. Cremorn Avenue sounded classy, a far cry from his own street in a rundown area of Notting Hill.

His luck was in. When he dialed the number, a woman answered—young, judging by her voice, and probably beautiful. She sounded assured, as if certain of her physical attraction.

"Hello," he said, using his customary approach and assumed voice. "It's David."

"David?" she asked, hesitating a little, as if not quite sure who he was but not too thrown by the call.

"We met at a party a little while ago," he said.

"At the Blakemores?"

It wasn't often he was given such an easy let-in and he said quickly, seizing the opportunity, "Yes, that's right."

"Did Mickey introduce us?"

It was getting better and better.

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He said, "Yes, he did. As a matter of fact, Mickey gave me your phone number." He dropped his voice still deeper, in readiness to add some remark along the lines of "He told me you were the best lay in the whole of north London" when she forestalled him by saying, "Just a minute—I shan't be long."

He heard a clunk as the receiver was put down and voices, hers and someone else's—a man's, he thought—conferred briefly in the distance. Then she picked up the phone again. "How long are you in London for?" she asked.

The question surprised him, but only momentarily. "Just for a few days," he said.

"Where are you staying?"

"The Savoy," he said. It was the only hotel he could think of on the spur of the moment. But he had the presence of mind to add with a nonchalant coolness, as if amused at the question, "Where else?"

"Of course," she agreed quickly, before adding, "But I think we'd better meet somewhere else, not there."

Armitage could hardly believe his good fortune. She was actually suggesting a date! It was the first time this had ever happened and, aware that if he wasn't careful he might blow it, he said, playing along with his role of an out-of-town visitor, unfamiliar with London, "Where do you suggest? Somewhere central?"

"Do you know the Bunch of Grapes in Holland Street?"

"No," he said. Which was true—he hadn't heard of it. "Where exactly is it?"

"Just off Oxford Street. The taxi-driver will know it. I'll meet you there in about an hour." She rang off without saying goodbye.

He replaced his own receiver more slowly.

The situation was both exciting and tricky. Of course he'd go. He wasn't going to pass up the chance of meeting her. But there would be problems. For one thing, he didn't know her name, which could lead to difficulties, although he thought he could bluff his way through them. Then there was the question of their supposedly mutual acquaintance, Mickey. But much more importantly, he was meant to have met her. And she him. As soon as they came face to face, she'd realize she'd never seen him before, either at the Blakemores' party or anywhere else. It would need careful handling—but, given a little ingenuity on his part, he thought he could play it along for a time at least.

Despite her suggestion about taking a taxi—as if that were the

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most natural thing in the world—he went by Underground, having looked up Holland Street on the map and found that it was only a short distance from Oxford Circus tube station. He still had on his good suit, the one he wore to the office, but he changed his shirt and put on the silk tie he'd treated himself to at Harrods' sale the previous January. Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, he combed his hair carefully over the balding patch, wishing he looked more like his alter ego David, whom he imagined as being tall and athletic like Mel Gibson or Timothy Dalton.

In the event, he had no problem recognizing the young woman. He was already seated in the bar of the Bunch of Grapes, having chosen a table facing the door, when about ten minutes after his arrival, she came in.

Raymond was quite sure it was her. She was alone. She had that confident manner which went with her voice. And he had been right—she was not only young, in her early twenties, but she was beautiful as well.

As she stood inside the doorway, surveying the occupants of the bar as if looking for someone, he had the opportunity to study her.

She was shorter than he had imagined from her voice. He had pictured someone taller. Not that it mattered. He was more than gratified by what he saw. She had long dark hair that fell loose about her shoulders, a tiny waist clinched in with a broad black-patent-leather belt (to a pale-green-silk dress which looked expensive), bare arms because it was summer. And a sensational figure easily discernible under the thin fabric of her dress.

He raised a hand and she came toward him, looking surprised and faintly disapproving, as if he weren't at all what she had expected.

"Hello," he said, plunging straight into the speech he'd rehearsed on his way. "I'm David, Mickey's friend—only you probably won't remember me. When I said Mickey had introduced us, it was a bit of an exaggeration. In fact, he just pointed you out to me at the Blakemores' party. He said to get in touch with you. Let me get you a drink. What'll you have?"

"A vodka and tonic," she said, swept along, as he'd intended, by the speed of his explanation. By the time he'd got back to the table with the drinks, his a whisky and soda which he didn't normally buy for himself but which he thought David might enjoy, he was pleased to see that she seemed to have accepted him. At least, she'd settled herself down at the table with every indication of staying, her handbag on the empty chair beside her.

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But she wasn't entirely at ease. As he placed her glass in front of her, she asked (deliberately testing him out, he suspected), "How *is* Mickey?"

"Fine," he said. "Busy."

"And he told you to ring me?"

"That's right," Raymond replied. He had kept up David's lazy drawl and now assumed what he thought might be David's manner—cool, offhand, unfazed by anything, not even her. "He gave me your number and told me to contact you."

She seemed to find the word "contact" significant, for she asked, leaning forward in her chair, "He actually said that? 'Contact Julia'?"

He smiled David's smile, a lopsided tilt to the corner of his mouth accompanied by a knowing slant of the head. The amusement was genuine. Without any effort on his part, he had found out her name. "His very words," he assured her. " 'The next time you're in London,' Mickey said, 'contact Julia.' So here I am, carrying out orders."

He said it lightly but saw her frown as if his manner puzzled her. "On business?" she asked him. "Was that what Mickey had in mind?"

"Oh, definitely business," he told her. God knows what she was referring to, but he was quite happy to go along with the idea. He even felt confident enough to embroider on it a little, "You know Mickey. He'll never pass up the chance of a deal."

To his surprise, she began to gather up her handbag, leaving her vodka and tonic almost untouched. "We can't talk here," she said. "Let's go back to the house. You don't mind, do you?"

Mind! He could hardly believe his luck, but in order not to seem too eager he merely remarked with a shrug, "I'm easy. Ask Mickey. He'll tell you I'm happy to go along with anybody's plans."

Outside, he hailed a taxi, which she seemed to expect, giving the same address to the driver that he'd seen in the telephone directory and fortunately remembered. "Number fourteen Cremorn Avenue, Hampstead," he said.

It seemed to be the right move on his part, for without protesting she got into the back of the taxi. He climbed in beside her, sitting close enough to feel her bare arm against the sleeve of his jacket. He could smell her perfume, too—something delicious, faintly spicy, and exotic.

They didn't talk much on the journey, which suited him. Instead, he was able to think about what he'd do next. Although they were

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going to her house, a suggestion which astonished and excited him, he wasn't foolish enough to think she'd welcome any advances on his part. She wasn't the type you could make a pass at straight off. Besides, her intention in inviting him home with her seemed to be to talk business. But at least he'd got his foot round the door, so to speak. If he played his cards right, he might get another date. And after that, who knows what might happen?

As for the business, whatever it was, he could probably string her along for the time being, although he could see that sooner or later he'd have to come clean about the phone call. He'd explain it away as a wrong number. He might even turn it into a compliment to her. ("As soon as I spoke to you, I couldn't hang up. Do you know you've got an incredibly provocative voice?")

The taxi was grinding its way up Fitzjohn's Avenue toward Hampstead. Near the top of the hill, it turned right and swung into a driveway and stopped. They got out and Raymond paid the driver, overtipping him in a mood of sudden expansiveness.

The house overawed him, though. It was huge—one of those enormous detached houses, modern but in the Georgian style and looking as if it ought to be set in the countryside as part of a gentleman's estate, not in London NW3.

There were rosebeds on either side of the porch, and the front door, which Julia unlocked, was double-leaved.

Raymond followed her into a large square hall with a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling and paintings on the walls, each with its own individual spotlight.

"Come into the drawing room," she said.

She led the way through another pair of doors into a room that he would have called the lounge except it was four or five times larger than his mother's lounge at home. It was vast, furnished with sofas and armchairs covered in dark-red leather and lamps with great bases of Chinese porcelain. A white carpet, like a field of snow, covered the floor, and to his left there was a large window hung with silk curtains, extravagantly swagged and draped, which looked out over a garden growing dusky in the fading light.

He barely had time to register the security grille over the window before he was aware of a man rising to his feet from one of the leather armchairs—a short, powerfully built middle-aged man casually dressed in a loose shirt and linen trousers. There was a controlled air about him, as if he were conserving his energy.

Although Julia made no attempt to introduce him, Raymond as-

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sumed the man must be the L. B. Packard under whose name the phone number and address had been listed in the directory.

"So you persuaded him to come back with you," Packard said, addressing Julia and ignoring Raymond, although his eyes swiveled in Raymond's direction, the gaze resting on his face with a curious immobility.

The man was old enough to be Julia's father, but from the manner in which he spoke to her Raymond guessed this wasn't their relationship.

"He said Mickey told him to contact me," Julia replied. "He evidently knows you and Mickey do business."

"Fetch Vince," Packard said, and Julia left the room, passing Raymond but not looking in his direction.

During this brief exchange, Raymond had stood on the edge of the white carpet, feeling ill at ease. The man's presence was unexpected and complicated the situation still further. He was aware, too, that even before Julia had met him at the Bunch of Grapes, she and Packard must have discussed the possibility of her bringing him back to the house. Almost as if it had been planned, he thought. It made him apprehensive. The business connection, too, was an unknown factor but clearly more important than he had realized.

And yet Packard had not addressed him directly but had merely looked at him with that slow, heavy gaze.

It was an omission Packard now corrected. Coming forward, he put out a hand for Raymond to shake, at the same time waving him with his free hand toward one of the armchairs with its back to the doors. "Sit down," he said, adding almost before Raymond had time to settle himself against the leather upholstery, "Drink? What can I get you? A whisky and soda?"

"Fine—thanks," Raymond said, recovering a little and giving one of David's smiles.

There were cut-glass tumblers and a decanter on a side table, together with a siphon. Packard half filled one of the tumblers, adding a mere splash of soda before carrying the glass over to Raymond, who took it warily. The whisky he had drunk in the pub was already making him feel slightly queasy. He wondered if he could manage to get through all that drink without doing something quite awful, like passing out or throwing up on the carpet.

"So you're David, a friend of Mickey's," Packard said, resuming his own seat opposite Raymond.

"That's right," Raymond said. He tried to appear at ease, crossing

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his legs and holding the glass casually in one hand, but he was aware that David's smile was becoming too stretched. The muscles round his mouth were beginning to ache with the effort of keeping it in place.

"You're business partners?" Packard suggested.

"In a way, yes," Raymond replied cautiously.

"And it was Mickey's idea you phone? What exactly was the deal he had in mind?"

Before Raymond could reply, he heard the doors behind him open and, thinking it was Julia coming back, he craned his neck round to look, grateful for her reappearance. With her in the room, he felt more confident about beginning his explanation about the wrong number. It was time, he realized, to extricate himself from the situation.

Only it wasn't Julia. It was a tall West Indian, dressed as if for tennis in a white T-shirt and shorts, who entered silently and sat down on a chair near the door, resting his elbows on the knees of his white shorts—the Vince, Armitage assumed, Julia had been sent off to find.

"You see," Packard continued, his voice measured, the tone reasonable, "there seems to be a slight difficulty. After you rang and spoke to Julia, I got in touch with Mickey. He says he doesn't know anybody named David and he can't remember asking you or anyone else at the Blakemores' party to contact her. Odd, isn't it? I just wondered how you got hold of my phone number and who told you that Mickey and I did business together. I'm curious, you understand."

Raymond had twisted back to look at him. He was aware of how silent the room was. More than silent. The atmosphere was heavy with a great tension of waiting, as before a storm, when the air grows dense and seems to press on the lungs.

Raymond put his glass down carefully on a low table beside his chair and cleared his throat.

"Look," he said, speaking in his normal voice, which even to his ears sounded insubstantial and reedy. "I think I'd better explain. Actually, you're quite right—I don't know anybody called Mickey. I just happened to look up a name in the phonebook—yours as it turned out—and rang the number. I do it sometimes, just as a bit of a joke. When someone answers, I say I'm David because—"

His voice trailed away. Packard had beckoned to Vince with his eyes, giving a small backward jerk of his head toward the window.

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Silently, Vince got to his feet and, crossing the room, unlooped the tasseled tiebacks. With a soft rustle, like a long drawn-out sigh, the silk curtains closed across the glass, shutting out the view of the twilit garden.

When they had fallen into place, Packard said very quietly, "I see," his eyes, with that full, motionless gaze, fastened on Raymond's face.

"Just a bit of a joke," Raymond repeated. He got to his feet. "Sorry and all that. I didn't mean to put you to any trouble." No one said anything and he felt obliged to add, glancing ostentatiously at his watch, "Well, I'll be pushing off now if it's all the same to you."

"Vince will run you home in the car," Packard said.

"No, really," Raymond protested. "I'll go back on the tube. It's no bother."

Packard appeared not to hear. He was addressing Vince, who had taken up a position behind his chair. "The car's ready?" he asked.

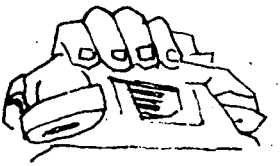
Vince nodded.

Packard turned back to Raymond. "Vince will take you," he said as if that were the end of the matter.

Raymond could see there was no point in arguing. He'd have to accept the lift, although he decided that, once in the car, he'd talk Vince into dropping him off at an Underground station. He didn't fancy Vince or any of them, Julia included, knowing where he lived.

In the event, it was a longer journey than he had anticipated. Much, much longer.

Somewhere out in the Essex countryside, far from Notting Hill, the car eventually stopped and Raymond Armitage slipped quietly into a river, where he floated away, face upwards, eyes open, staring up at the stars, an expression of acute anxiety on his face, as if he were counting them and wanted to be sure that he got the number right.



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a *NEW* short story by

PATRICIA MATTHEWS

Sarah offered to help pay for the expense of putting her parents in a home so that she and Vilma could both have a life, but Vilma wouldn't hear of it. She went on and on about duty and the family home, but Sarah had always felt that she was just afraid. She felt safe there in that old house, and in her life, and she didn't want to make any changes . . .

OLD HABITS

by PATRICIA MATTHEWS

The only reason I moved back home to Whalen was because Vilma kept after me so. She's the older, and I've never been able to say no to her when she keeps on like that, complaining and pushing until a body simply doesn't know what to do and gives in out of sheer fatigue. She kept telling me that the big house was too much for her since Momma died and that she'd promised Momma on her deathbed—Momma's, that is—that she'd never sell the house to strangers. It was *my* duty, Vilma said, to help her keep her promise—and since I was widowed now, Momma would have wanted us to stick together.

Well, one of my real strong traits is that I feel compelled to be fair. And Vilma put her case pretty forcefully. And to *be* fair, I suppose I felt a little guilty, even though I shouldn't have. It isn't my fault she's lived the life she has. It's not my fault she never married and I did, or that she stayed home and took care of Papa when he was ailing, and then Momma in her old age. I offered to help pay for the expense of putting them in a home so that we both could have a life, but she wouldn't hear of it. She went on and on about duty and the family home, but I always felt that she was just

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afraid. She felt safe there in that old house, and in her life, and she didn't want to make any changes. She made her decision, and that was her right—and I made mine, and that was my right. Still, she *was* my sister, and I *was* alone now and so was she.

So I finally said yes, rented out my home here in California, and moved back to the family house to live with Vilma.

The minute I caught sight of her at the bus station I knew I'd made a mistake. It had been forty years since I'd lived in the same house as Vilma, but looking at her standing there I suddenly remembered what living at home had been like, and why I'd been so anxious to leave.

You see, Vilma and I have never really gotten on. We're just too different. Vilma's a lot like Momma was, sort of superior-acting, bossy, and cranky. Wanting everything just so and thinking that her way is the only way to do things.

I take more after my father. I don't like arguments and fighting. I'm easygoing in most things, but I can be stubborn about things that are important to me. And I'll fight back if I think I'm wronged. Like I said, I like things to be fair. I remember when I was a little girl I was unhappy about something I felt wasn't right and Momma just laughed and asked me who had promised me fairness?

Well, I didn't have an answer for that. I never knew who promised it to me, I just knew I expected it. And I always felt both Momma and Vilma were unfair, going through life with blinders on, only seeing their own side of things.

At any rate, seeing Vilma waiting there I had my doubts as to how she and I would get along living together. Still, I was here, and I had to give it a try. People change. Maybe she had mellowed some.

I'd seen Vilma only a few months ago, at Momma's funeral, but now I took a good look at her. If it's true that old people's faces are a record of their life, I was in for trouble. She hadn't been bad-looking as a girl—although I was always considered the pretty one—but now she was dry as a fig, mouth turned down at the corners, squinty-eyed, all topped by a grey birds'-nest of hair piled up every which-a-way. It was plain she didn't care anything about fashion and that she didn't read the mature beauty columns. Why, I felt like a young thing compared to her and wondered if people might not think she was my mother.

Despite the fact that she'd bullied and nagged me into coming, she didn't seem any too pleased to see me. When I got off of the bus

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and she saw me, her eyes squinted down even more and she looked like she'd just taken a big bite of lemon.

"Well, Sarah," she said, looking me over real good. "Mutton in lamb's clothing!" But I paid her no mind. I knew it was just jealousy. Still, it didn't make for a warm welcome.

I felt a pang again at seeing the old house where I'd spent my youth. It hadn't changed much. Vilma had given me my old bedroom, the one in the corner that looked out on the big old elm tree—the one I used to climb down to get out of the house at night when Momma and Daddy were asleep until Vilma told on me.

I spent the first afternoon looking over the house and grounds and remembering. The house had been kept up pretty well, but it needed new wallpaper, and new linoleum in the kitchen. If I stayed, I intended to do something about that.

Vilma left me pretty much alone that first day, but the next morning at breakfast she started in, telling me about how things were going to be organized. She had a long list of all the household chores, which she'd divided up, some for her, some for me. The only thing is, she never asked me which chores I *wanted* to do. Not fair. It was time I put my foot down or she'd think she could walk all over me. We weren't girls any more and I had a right to my say.

I broke in as she was reading the list to me. "Vilma," I said, "I want and intend to do my full share, but it's not fair that you do all the deciding. I think we should each choose the chores we want to do."

She looked at me all wide-eyed with surprise. "Don't tell me you still have *that* silly habit, thinking the world's supposed to be fair? I'd of thought you had learned better by now."

And then, as if glad of the opportunity, she moved right on to list all the other things I did that she disapproved of, just like she used to do when we were girls. I dressed too young for my age. My hair color was ridiculous. I was too plump. I was lazy. And it was only right that she make the decisions about which of us did which chores because *she* had been taking care of the house for the past forty years.

I had this awful feeling that I was twelve years old again, listening to my mother and sister lecturing me about my supposed sins. And all the while Vilma was talking, she was doing the thing she used to do that I hated so much—reaching across the kitchen table with

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her fork, she speared a piece of my bacon and brought it to her mouth.

I glared at her as she chewed, but she took no notice, and reached over again to take a forkful of my scrambled eggs.

It's funny, isn't it, how old feelings come back? I felt a small, hot knot begin to form in my stomach, just as I used to in the old days when Vilma pushed me too far.

"Vilma," I said, real calm, "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your fork out of my plate. If you wanted eggs and bacon, why didn't you fix yourself some, instead of that oatmeal?"

She looked at me in that superior way she has. "Why, I just wanted a taste. You don't need to get so worked up about it. In fact, you should thank me. You need to eat less, anyway."

I just sat there glaring at her, too angry for words. Vilma had always done this to me when we were kids. It wasn't so bad at dinner, because we all sat down together and there were bowls of food on the table and sideboard and I made a fuss if she took things off my plate. But at lunch, when Papa wasn't home and Momma fixed us what we wanted, Vilma would just ask for a salad or something and then start in on my sandwich or whatever I was having. "Just having a little taste," she called it. Well, I felt like it was an invasion! And eating in restaurants was the worst, because she would never order dessert and then eat half of mine—and I couldn't make a fuss out in public or Momma would have been angry.

"You know," I finally said to Vilma, determined not to let her get the upper hand, "you keep going on about my bad habits, but you don't seem to recognize your own. Eating off of other people's plates is disgusting and rude. And you've got to be one of the meanest-spirited people I've ever met. You're bossy and thoughtless and—"

Vilma speared my last bit of bacon and smiled triumphantly. "My, you *have* gotten excitable in your old age, haven't you." She raised her eyebrows. "You're making a mountain out of a molehill like you always do. Imagine getting all worked up because someone takes a little taste of your food. Now hurry up and finish your breakfast—I promised I'd bring you to the hospital with me so you can help out as a Grey Lady."

I looked down at my ruined breakfast. Of course she'd never asked me if I *wanted* to work as a Grey Lady. But then, Vilma was never one to care much about what anyone else wanted.

Right then, I had half a mind to just pack my bags and go. But I had leased my house for a year and I didn't relish the idea of

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staying in some hotel. Besides, I'd committed myself. Once I've made a promise or said I'll do something, I do my darndest to see it through.

I thought of that story—you know, the one about the couple that didn't get along and so the husband decided to kill his wife. His idea was to be real nice to her so that she wouldn't suspect what he was planning to do, but when he was real nice to her she was so happy that she was real nice to *him,* and they got along so well that he decided he didn't need to kill her after all.

So I decided to try it on Vilma. I went along and joined the Grey Ladies, was sweet as pie, agreed with everything Vilma said, and held my tongue even when I was boiling inside. The only thing wrong with that was that my stomach ached all the time from holding in what I felt and Vilma was just as mean as ever.

By now winter had set in and the town was covered with snow. Living in California, I'd forgotten about those fierce Eastern winters. Getting out of the house was a problem, but staying in with Vilma was even worse, fond as I'd become of the old house.

Vilma never let up. She could never say anything good—although she always told me that what she was saying was for *my* good. I tried to shut out the sound of her voice, to stay away from her—the house is plenty big enough to do that—but she followed me around. If I settled in the study, she'd be there, too. I wasn't even safe in my bedroom unless I locked the door.

I'd been looking over the house, and thought that having some interior repairs and decorating done would help fill the winter months—and bring someone else into the house for a bit of a change. Momma had left the house to both Vilma and me, equal shares. When I brought up the subject of putting in a new floor in the kitchen and doing some wallpapering, she hit the roof.

"The house stays as it is," she said in a nasty tone. "I'm not made of money."

I tried to keep my temper. "We'd each pay a share," I said. "It wouldn't cost much."

She shook her head. "No. You have to have my permission to do anything. We have to agree. And I don't want anything changed."

I was so mad I felt my chin tremble, and I hurried out of the room.

But then, there she was at dinner, picking at my plate again. That was when I came as close to losing control as I ever have. I reached over and knocked the fork out of her hand, and as she stared at me

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I shouted: "Don't you ever do that again! If you do, something terrible is going to happen! You can only push me so far!"

Well, I think it startled her to see me so angry, and for a minute she looked almost frightened. For the rest of her meal she didn't touch my plate, and I felt a great sense of relief. Maybe I'd gotten through to her at last. It was only a little victory, but it made me feel good.

For two days, things were relatively peaceful. Vilma was somewhat careful around me, like she wasn't sure what I was going to do. But by the end of the week, the shock of the way I had acted had worn off and she was back to her usual self.

On Sunday—my turn to cook—we were having roast beef, and while she was telling me what we were going to watch on TV that night she reached over and took the piece of beef that I'd just cut off of my plate. I didn't say a word, just finished my meal, and nodded while she talked. But my mind was busy.

Tuesday it's my turn to cook again, and I think I've figured out a way to deal with Vilma that's fair. I won't have to feel guilty, because I'm really not going to do anything *to* her at all. Whatever happens, she'll have done it herself. It may be a moot point, but my conscience will be clear.

Tuesday night, for dinner, I'll bake a special dessert—dried apple cobbler. In my own portion, I'm going to put the ground glass I'll spend tomorrow morning crushing. The rest of the cobbler will be harmless. Of course, I'll warn Vilma, as I always do, not to eat from my plate. If she insists, what can I do?

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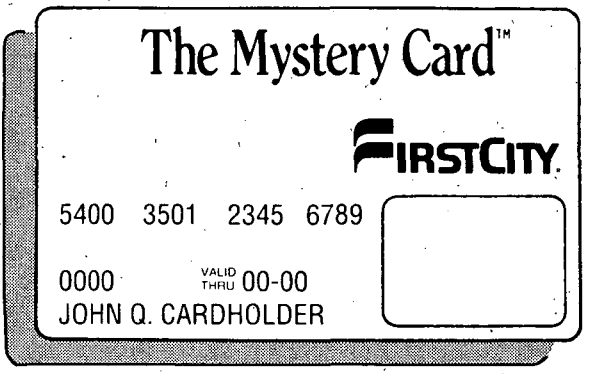

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

Cold, grey, and shapeless—the words seemed to describe her husband to perfection. Sheila Diggs suddenly marveled that she'd been able to push the burden of him as far as she had. Well, now it was dumping time. She didn't mean divorce—not after putting eighteen years into her marriage and into her husband's career. No, she would have herself a nice little affair. She was still attractive, after all. If she hadn't been propositioned lately, well, she'd made herself something of a reputation as a faithful wife.

But that was about to change. And who would be the lucky man? She paraded the candidates of her acquaintanceship before her and, heaven help her, they were a sorry lot indeed. One affair might not be enough . . .

MRS. BRODIE'S COW

by JAMES POWELL

One overcast afternoon some fifty or sixty years ago, a sudden warm white rain fell down from the sky and Mrs. Brodie's black-and-brown cow grazing down by the creek took shelter under the fieldstone bridge. Someone passing by on the gravel highway leading out of town saw the cow standing there shoulder-high in the creek and mentioned it around for a laugh. From then on, that rural corner of southern Ontario likened anyone who went from bad to worse to the cow that waded into the creek to get out of the rain.

Whoever started the story, it wasn't Mrs. Brodie, a humorless, pinch-faced woman, whose sallow color resembled the flesh of the sugar beets she and her husband farmed. As for old Brodie himself, he would never have noticed the cow. He always kept his eyes on the road when he drove the open wagon to town and back. His family

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had worked the heart out of the land long before it passed into his hands and the sight of the rocky fields gave him no pleasure.

Eventually, the cow died and, not long after, Mrs. Brodie died, too. "I've lost my cook," old Brodie announced to his drinking buddies in the men's beverage room of the Columbia House. He went on to live alone for fifteen more years before passing the land he hated so much on to a nephew he disliked who worked at the bank in town.

Today Mrs. Brodie's cow still comes up in cases of bad-to-worse. But the Brodie farm is gone. The nephew rented it out for twenty years or so, until the Canadian subsidiary of a Japanese electronics firm announced it would open an assembly plant ten miles away in Regalia. Then he went into partnership with a contractor and built a small development of expensive homes, which, because of the bridge and the upward slope of the site, they called Stonebridge Heights. As they hoped, several of the new plant officials bought houses there.

Sheila Diggs had long ago grown weary of looking at her husband's glossy round face. When he talked at the dinner table, she pretended to listen by staring out through the window behind his left shoulder and across the evening twilight to the old stone bridge. In winter, the headlights of passing cars made the round reflectors on the bridge abutments glow red like roadside animal eyes.

One winter night as she watched the snow fall in the headlight beams, she found herself remembering the kinds of snow she had shoveled growing up on Indian Road, a curve of pretty brick houses in Toronto's west end. As the eldest, the job of shoveling had fallen to her. She remembered the dry snow that blew back from the shovel like sand in your face and the carpet snow you could roll up with your hands, leaving the sidewalk bare behind you. And then there was the sloppy stuff you plowed through until the shovel grew so heavy you had to dump the load to one side into a wet, grey, shapeless heap.

Cold, grey, and shapeless—the words seemed to describe her husband to perfection. Sheila suddenly marveled that she'd been able to push the burden of him as far as she had. Well, now it was dumping time. She didn't mean divorce—not after putting eighteen years into her marriage and into her husband's career. No, she would have herself a nice little affair. She was still attractive, after all. If she hadn't been propositioned lately, well, she'd made herself something of a reputation as a faithful wife. But that was about to change.

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And who would be the lucky man? She paraded the candidates of her acquaintanceship before her and, heaven help her, they were a sorry lot indeed. One affair might not be enough. But she'd have to start somewhere.

It wasn't until the next week, when they gave a small dinner party, that she hit on the man. In the middle of dessert, she looked down the table and decided that Seymour Geddes would have to do.

The Geddeses were neighbors. A rail fence and two identical metal utility sheds that looked like miniature barns divided the backs of their lots. Geddes was no prize. He had the habit of facing away from whoever he was talking to and watching them out of the corners of his eyes. When he was spoken to, these eyes would flee to the far corners. All this gave him a cunning, eavesdropper's air. But Geddes had one thing going for him. Behind his mask of neighborly competitiveness—the first or biggest tomato, the greenest lawn, and feats of the barbecue sort—Sheila suspected he disliked her husband very much. Why else would he make Vincent the butt of his practical jokes?

For instance, Sheila's husband liked to play the fool when he presided at cookouts. He'd wear a smoke-stained old ten-gallon hat, a souvenir of his Calgary days, even though Sheila'd told him the high crown emphasized his shortness, something he was sensitive about. And he'd strap on a leather gunbelt with a water pistol in the holster and use the pistol to handle flareups on the grill. When the mood moved him, he wasn't above shooting at the guests, refilling his weapon from a tin sand-pail with a starfish on it, requisitioned from an old sandbox where visiting nieces and nephews used to play before it had been overrun by cats. Two years ago, Geddes had quietly distributed loaded water pistols among the guests. Her husband's first squirt into the crowd was answered in spades from all sides, leaving poor, dull, sodden Vincent smiling sheepishly amidst the laughter to prove he was a good sport. So Geddes it would be.

Sheila believed in acting decisively once she'd made up her mind. When the dinner party left the table, she watched for her chance. She found Geddes alone in the library, examining the pictures on the wall. Sheila had decorated the room with crayon and colored-pencil drawings done for her by her very young relations and was pleased with the effect. The innocence of the unlikely trees, the behemoth flowers, and the gingerbread people touched her. Matted and framed, they took on the look of art.

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Sheila began what she thought was a rather subtle overture when he turned to face her squarely and interrupted. "Honey, Seymour's got bad news. You're not his type." And with the ghost of an unpleasant smile he walked away.

Her face burning and swearing under her breath, Sheila pushed through the french doors out to the terrace. Half her curses were for Diggs, or at least the smug, mean-spirited bore he'd become. Yes, she blamed him for her unhappiness and this humiliation. She set her jaw in the darkness. He would pay for it. And so would Geddes.

Sheila stayed out on the terrace long after she saw Geddes and his wife leave and heard Charlene Geddes' coarse laughter as they unsteadily negotiated the slope of the Diggs' back yard. By the time she went back inside she knew what she was going to do.

But the next morning Sheila awoke with doubts about her grand plan. All right, suppose she killed her husband and arranged it to look like one of Geddes' practical jokes gone bad. Wouldn't people say, "Well, sure, it was a stupid thing to do. But Geddes didn't mean to kill Diggs. Why would he?" No, that wouldn't do at all. Her husband must die and Geddes must be convicted of the crime. Geddes had to have a motive for murder.

After considerable thought, Sheila went to the phone and asked Mary Marge Brodie—nee Sommerville of the Sarnia, Ontario and Saginaw, Michigan Sommervilles—to meet her for lunch at the Sydenham Inn in Regalia. The banker's wife usually had a very full lunch schedule, but her ears detected in Sheila's tone that she was about to learn something of real interest from a rare source.

Mary Marge came into the dining room scarf aflutter, clothes mismatched and awry-looking, every inch like a sailing ship whose crew had mutinied. Her step was lively and her color good, which meant she had much to tell. She waved and set sail in Sheila's direction, bobbing to people she knew at other tables like a ship breasting the swells. (The woman lent herself to images. In other company, Sheila had once called her "the prom queen of Scarecrow High.") When she reached the table, she collapsed into a chair and without preamble started in on her news while raking through her handbag for her lighter.

She talked until her drink came, then, taking a sip, she sat back and waited with the beginnings of a smile. Sheila said such clever things.

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Suddenly Sheila had stage fright. How could she convince this woman of something so absurd? After all, Charlene Geddes was a stupid, sleepy-eyed thing with nothing going for her but good cheekbones. And if Mary Marge laughed, that would be the end of it. But it was too late to turn back.

Mustering her most solemn expression and earnest tone, Sheila said, "Mary Marge, I really don't know what to do. Vincent's having an affair with Charlene Geddes."

Mary Marge looked at her for a moment. Then she laughed. "Oh, lordy, lordy," she said, "we've all been wondering when you'd catch on."

Afraid she was staring, Sheila turned away. Mary Marge thought she was looking at her cigarettes. "Help yourself," she said, adding, "I thought you quit."

Sheila had. Months ago. She refused the offer with a shake of her head. All it had taken for her to give up cigarettes was for Vincent to say, "You're so tidy and it's such a damn filthy habit." Furious that she'd given him any grounds on which to condescend, Sheila quit smoking then and there. Those first cigaretteless days at the dinner table, each passing car made the round reflectors on the old stone bridge glow red like smokers in the darkness. But after a week or two they became animal eyes again.

She looked at Mary Marge. "How long has it been going on?" she asked.

"Almost two years."

"You might have told me," said Sheila, regretting the words as soon as they left her mouth. She and Mary Marge weren't really that close.

"Like the song says," said Mary Marge, " 'Never tell the girl the truth about the man that she adores.' Yours was the perfect marriage—you always said so yourself." She smiled and examined the tip of her cigarette thoughtfully. Then she laughed again to herself—out loud.

Yes, thought Sheila. The prom queen of Scarecrow High crack did get back to her.

The lunch passed quickly. Mary Marge could just barely sit still. When she left, she forgot a glove. But then she was always leaving something behind. Sheila smiled bitterly. If Mary Marge stopped at enough places to tell her story of the faithful wife who finally caught on, she'd arrive home stark naked. Well, at least Geddes now had a damn good motive for murder . . .

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From the Sydenham Inn, Sheila drove two blocks to the local supermarket. It wasn't her usual day to go for groceries, but she'd planned on combining lunch in town with Mary Marge and picking up a few things. After what she'd just heard, she was counting on the rote of shopping to help her get her thoughts in order.

When she and Charlene Geddes confronted each other near the Javex display in the soap aisle, they were both surprised. Wondering if she hadn't underestimated the woman, Sheila started a conversation and, wheeling her cart around, joined Charlene going up and down the aisles.

The woman seemed pleased, if a bit overwhelmed, by Sheila's attention. But she showed no spark of intelligence or character to explain why Vincent had turned to her. Finally, she stopped her cart and turned to Sheila as if about to utter something portentous.

"We're both blessed, you and I, Mrs. Diggs," she said. "Your husband's so nice and so is mine."

Were those sleepy eyes mocking her? Sheila wondered.

Charlene Geddes misunderstood Sheila's look. She patted the plastic bottle of charcoal lighter fluid she had just put in her cart. "Seymour always has me get this brand," she explained. "It's odorless and imparts no chemical smell or taste to the food."

Sheila drove home in a fury. How dare Vincent, how dare Geddes prefer that woman to her? How *dare* they? Well, they would both pay. Vincent would die a terrible death and Geddes would be blamed for it. Sheila stared at the road ahead of her. She knew just how she would pull it off.

For the next few days, Sheila treated her husband affectionately, smiling whenever he looked her way, showing him all the little kindnesses due to a family pet in the last days of a terminal illness.

Soon enough he asked her, "What'll it be for your birthday?"

"It's Victoria Day weekend, so I've invited everyone I could think of," she answered. "After all, it is the big four-oh. The birthday girl votes for chicken—you do that so well."

She watched him beam with brief pleasure at that before returning to his newspaper. A moment later she saw the paper droop and his puzzled expression. She knew he was wondering why she'd asked for chicken, which was not her favorite. Then the frown faded and the newspaper snapped up again. She knew he had decided she was just being economical with so many people coming. He had always praised her for keeping within the household budget. Yes, in their

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early years, with Vincent just out of school, she'd made do with what they'd had and put up a damn good front in the bargain.

Sheila's birthday arrived bright and a bit warm for May. Morning was taken up with party arrangements and instructing the middle-aged couple named Heaps, who hired themselves out for such things and would later tend bar and serve drinks. Vincent was having trouble reaching the outside socket to plug in the lights inside the string of Chinese lanterns hanging in the tree. Even though she knew they were lights that would never be turned on, Sheila sent him off grumbling to find an extension cord. Then she went up and bathed and changed.

Her new dress was long, mauve, and filmy, with a broad-brimmed hat to match. She had thought carefully about what to wear. Years afterward the children would remember. "How beautiful Auntie Sheila looked sitting out there on the lawn. It was her fortieth birthday, but you'd never have known it. And she seemed so happy. How could she know a terrible tragedy was about to snatch her husband from her?"

Vincent came over while she was putting on her makeup and took the top birthday card from the pile that had come today. "Little Dougy Kellog?" he said in mock astonishment as he read the return address. "Toronto? I thought the man I stole you from was still in Vancouver."

"He says he wangled a transfer back to the home office after his wife died," said Sheila. "Nice his remembering my birthday." She patted his hand. "Just let him try stealing me back. Just let him try."

In fact, she was already imagining a possible meeting between herself and Doug Kellog a respectable time after the funeral. She'd always liked Doug, even though she'd thought him too smart for his own good. It might be nice to see him again. Sheila shook her head at herself in the mirror. Talk about counting your chickens.

She was downstairs making her final tour of inspection when the first batch of nieces and nephews and their parents arrived. There were kisses to be given and the offering of her cheek to be kissed and the pretty wrappings on the presents to be admired. The gifts from the children were all bright tubes tied with ribbon, for they knew it was their drawings she liked most of all. She had them carry all the presents outside to a wicker table and chair set a bit apart from the other lawn furniture.

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During the next hour, more family arrived from Toronto and nearby London and the pile of presents grew. Now the local guests began to arrive, having to park farther and farther up and down the road. Charlene and Seymour Geddes, who had volunteered their driveway for parking space, came on foot, bending down to step through the fence rails. Geddes always pulled off some kind of stunt at these affairs. Sheila smiled to herself. Well, this was one time he was going to be left in the shade.

Mary Marge and her husband arrived, she looking like the wreck of the *Hesperus* in large polkadots. Almost at once she discovered she had forgotten Sheila's present and sent her husband trudging back to the car. Brodie was used to returning home for things.

With birthday-girl authority, Sheila had arranged that the cake be cut and the presents opened first. Then the nieces and nephews would be handed over to the teenaged baby-sitter the Timminses across the road recommended so highly. Provided with a picnic hamper, she would drive them all to a farm near Regalia where ponies and pony carts were for hire.

After the children had gone, Sheila roved among her guests, smiling and chatting until she saw Vincent stride down the lawn to the four three-legged barbecue kettles that stood like timpani near the fence. Things were getting underway. Vincent had already built the charcoal briquettes into careful pyramids. Now he doused them with fluid, gave it a minute to soak in, and dropped a match into each grill. Suddenly there were four healthy pillars of fire at the bottom of the yard.

But it would be half an hour before the coals were ready to receive the chicken. Sheila, already weak at the knees, wasn't sure she could last that long. Then she noticed Mrs. Heaps at her chair down on the lawn. A small breeze had started up. The woman was gathering the strewn wrapping paper that was trembling and inching about. Sheila had promised the wrapping paper to her cleaning lady, who had a way of stringing long diamonds of bright paper into necklaces and bracelets.

Excusing herself from the people she was talking to, Sheila hurried down and took charge of the wrapping paper, sending Mrs. Heaps around to make sure no one had an empty glass. She collected the rest of the paper and ribbon herself, grateful to have the work, then sat down with the paper in her lap so it wouldn't blow away and began slowly and carefully to tie the lengths of ribbon into neat,

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multicolored sheepshanks. When that task was done, she planned to use the table to smooth out the wrapping paper sheet by sheet, working carefully so she wouldn't have to think about what was going to happen. Her greatest fear was that she would relent.

While Sheila was still working on the ribbons, Mary Marge came across the grass and, dragging over a nearby chair, sat down beside her. Lighting a cigarette, she nodded at the red trail of ribbon Sheila had just laid out on the table.

"Nice," she said. "Wherever did you learn that? Did you have a cub pack?"

Sheila nodded. "When we were starting out in Kingston. Vincent even coached lacrosse. Can you imagine?"

"You should have had children," said Mary Marge halfheartedly. The green-baize portfolio where Sheila kept her birthday drawings was leaning against a table leg. Mary Marge lifted it up onto her lap and paged through the drawings. "A damn pity," she said. "Our glorious schools will teach them the correct way to draw and they'll lose all this—what-do-you-call-it?"

"Ignorance?" offered Sheila. She reflected. "Ignorance. Maybe that's all innocence really is."

Here they were interrupted by a fanfare shout as Vincent, in full Western kit—boots, hat, and gun belt with a water pistol in the holster—came out of the house carrying a tray heaped with pale-bluish chicken parts. Geddes, who had been waiting near the door, now fell in ahead of him with the starfish sand-pail like an acolyte bearing a sacred vessel. He never missed a chance to join in when Diggs wanted to play the buffoon.

Earlier, Sheila had pointed out the little sand-pail sitting by the hose spigot at the corner of the house and asked Geddes to carry it down when Vincent came out with the chicken. She hadn't had to, she supposed. Later the police would find his fingerprints on the plastic bottle of odorless lighter fluid in the bushes near the spigot. Stealing the stuff from the Geddes' utility shed during the night had been almost too easy.

"I've got to get my camera," said Mary Marge, getting out of her chair. "I still haven't forgiven myself for missing that last big water-gun fight. God, the look on your husband's face!"

Sheila watched Vincent march toward her, solemnly tilting the tray this way and that to show the guests what their meal looked like raw. When he reached Sheila, he made a bow. She tried to answer with a big smile. But it faltered when he said, "Lady, we

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who are about to die salute you"—adding, "I'm speaking for the chickens, of course."

Off he and Geddes went, back down to the barbecue kettles. As Vincent leveled the four glowing pyramids of charcoal and put the grills in place, Geddes set down the pail and slipped through the rail fence. Pulling on a length of cord, he raised a pleated, computer-made banner between two trees. It read: DEAD-EYE DIGGS, THE FASTEST SQUIRT IN THE WEST. Vincent didn't see the banner, but he happened to choose that moment to load his water pistol, which added to the guests' polite laughter. Then he picked up the long-handled tongs he used to put the chicken on the grill.

Sheila was trembling now. It was starting. Vincent would lay out the chicken pieces on the grill one by one. Before he was done, the drippings would make the flames leap up and lick at the edges of the first pieces.

Vincent wanted flare, but not too much. It was his practice to lean over the grills with the sand-pail in one hand and the water pistol in the other, subduing but not overwhelming the fire with what he described as pinpoint marksmanship. Well, when he tried it today, he, the grill, the water pistol, and the pail would go up in a fireball. And Sheila would force herself to watch.

Suddenly, Vincent lay down the tongs and started for the house. As he passed Sheila, he smiled, showed his empty glass, and said, "Cook needs a refill."

Yes, Vincent was in his playful-drunk stage. The mean drunk came later. Sheila forced herself to remember what this was all about—her loneliness, the humiliation, Vincent the way he really was, Geddes' nasty little smile, and silly, silly Charlene Geddes.

She was afraid she would start to cry. She didn't want anyone to see that. Not until later. So she turned sideways in her chair, still clutching the wrapping paper to her. That was when she saw Mary Marge's cigarettes and lighter on the corner of the table. She snatched them up, desperate for a smoke to calm her nerves, hurrying to sneak one in before Vincent returned.

The wind rose and tugged at Sheila's sleeve. She leaned forward to cup one hand around the lighter. The second her thumb spun the flint-wheel and the flame sprang to life, she heard Vincent say, "Filthy habit, birthday girl." She snapped her head around and saw the look of drunken solicitude on her husband's face and the full glass in his hand. Mrs. Heaps, catching onto her job, must have met him halfway with a fresh drink. Sheila also saw the stream of fluid

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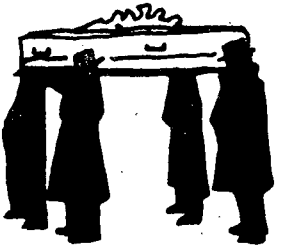
he'd fired from the water pistol to douse the lighter flame. She knew his aim would be true.

Sheila Diggs died just as the ambulance rushing her to the hospital crossed over the fieldstone bridge beneath which, years before, Mrs. Brodie's cow had found shelter from the rain.



DETECTIVERSE

YOU CAN'T WIN THEM ALL

by FRANK SANDELIUS

A stunning con artist named Sadie
Lived quite well on deals that were shady.
Every man was beguiled
When sweet Sadie smiled,
But the judge that she drew was a lady.

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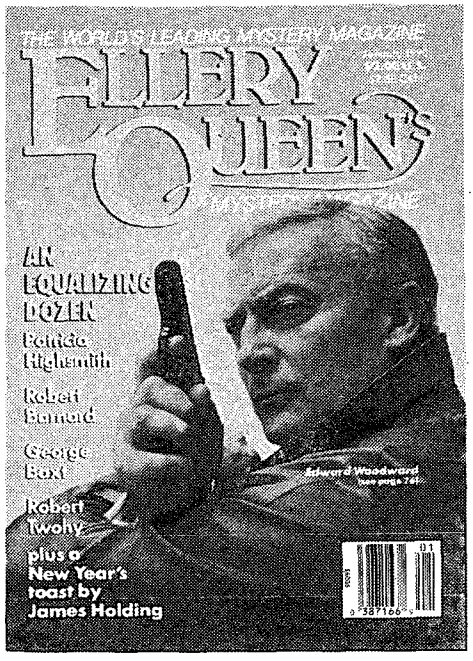

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a *NEW* short story by

ANDREW VACHSS

"A grown alligator is a fearsome thing," the curator said, "it really has no natural enemies. But the mother alligators don't protect the babies once the eggs hatch. One old legend says that a baby alligator who actually manages to survive all its enemies and grow to full size spends the rest of its life getting even. That's why they're so dangerous to man . . ."

WHITE ALLIGATOR

by ANDREW VACHSS

The alligators were tiny, perfectly formed predators. They shone a ghostly white in the swampy darkness of the big tank.

"You never saw white ones before, did you?" The curator was a plump young woman, thick glossy hair piled carelessly on top of her head, soft tendrils curling on her cheeks. Wearing a white smock, no rings on her fingers, nails square-cut. A pretty, bouncy woman, full of life, in love with her work.

I shook my head, waiting. I hate this part of the business. They always have a reason for what they want done—I don't need to hear it.

"Actually, white alligators aren't all that rare. It's just that when they're born in the wild, they don't have much chance of survival. A grown alligator is a fearsome thing—it really has no natural enemies. But the mother alligators don't protect the babies once the eggs hatch. One old legend says that a baby alligator who actually manages to survive all its enemies and grow to full size spends the rest of its life getting even. That's why they're so dangerous to man."

I nodded again.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

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"That's part of the service," I said. Catching her dark eyes, letting her feel the edges of the chill.

We walked past the bear pit. Grizzlies, Kodiaks, brown bears, black bears, all kinds. But the polar bear was in a separate area just around a sharp corner in the path. Prowling in circles, watching.

"How come the polar bear can't be with the others? He needs colder water or something?"

"She. That's a mama bear. Polar bears are solitary animals. They don't mix well. And when they have cubs, they attack anything that approaches."

"Show me where it's been happening."

We strolled over to the African Plains enclosure. Somebody had been sneaking into the zoo at night. It started with stoning a herd of deer. Then they shot one of the impalas with a crossbow. The animal didn't die. Whoever did it came back again. And a cape buffalo lost an eye.

"It's just a matter of time before he kills one of our animals," the curator said.

"He doesn't want to kill them. He wants them to hurt. Wants to hear them scream."

White dots blossomed on her cheeks. "How do you know?"

"I know them."

"Them?"

"Humans who do this."

Her hands were shaking.

"Nature can be hard, but it's never cruel. Survival of the fittest—that's how a species grows and protects itself. But animals never kill for fun."

"Neither do I," I said. Reminding her.

She reached in her pocketbook and handed me a thick envelope. "This is my own money. I couldn't go to the Board for help. They tried hiring security guards, but it kept happening. I can't have the animals tortured like this."

"I'll take care of it."

She fumbled in her purse. "You'll need a key. To get in after dark."

I waved it away. "Whoever's doing this didn't need a key."

The curator took a deep breath. Making up her mind, getting it under control. "I believe there have to be laws. Nature has its laws, we're supposed to have ours, too. But I don't want— I mean, you promised."

"I told you the truth," I said . . .

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He didn't come until the fourth night. I was waiting in the shadows cast by the Reptile House. The African Plains enclosure was to my left, the bear pits just past that. He was wearing sneakers, but the animals let me know he was coming. Restless stirring. A nightbird screamed.

I circled behind him to the bear pit. As soon as he walked past, I took the five cans of industrial-strength Teflon spray out of my pack and went to work. It wouldn't last more than a half hour—the concrete absorbs it real fast.

When I caught up with him again, he was standing at the fence, watching the herd of antelope, picking a target. Wearing some store-bought Ninja outfit. Stalking, he thought.

I stepped out of the dark, the pistol in my hand. He didn't turn around.

"Drop the toy, punk," I whispered, giving him a choice.

It fell from his hands.

"Hands up," I said, calm and quiet, moving closer.

"Wha—what do you want?"

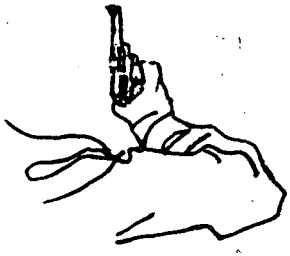
"What do I want? I want you. I've been waiting for you, maggot. We're going to take a little ride. To a nice hospital. Where they'll *talk* to you, boy. Maybe find out what else you've been doing when it gets dark. Understand?"

Standing maybe fifteen feet away. Giving him another choice.

"No!" he screamed, turning and running from me, sneakers slapping hard on the concrete.

I chased after him, letting him feel me coming. He was doing fine until he got to the curve just before the pit where the polar bear guarded her cubs.

Maybe he screamed.



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a ***NEW*** short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Edith's calm was making Ganley nervous. Maybe she knew more about this than she was letting on. "Shouldn't we call the cops?"

"What for?"

"It looks like somebody shot your husband, then stripped him and disposed of his body. I'd say that's worth a 911."

"If he's dead, he's dead," Edith said. "I'd rather not discuss his crooked betting practices with the boys in blue." She got up to lift a lid and peer in at the steaming potatoes . . .

DIRTY LAUNDRY

by WILLIAM BANKIER

"Maybe it's a false alarm," Larry Ganley said to Mrs. Maxwell as he delivered her laundry, fluffed and folded. "But one of your husband's shirts is here with bullet holes in it. And what looks like bloodstains."

Edith Maxwell used a fork to prod a sausage she was frying. Fat ran out and sizzled in the pan. "I'm not surprised," she said. But her dismay was evident.

"Where *is* Gus?"

"Gone. I figured he was running for his life." Ash from a cigarette between her lips fell into the pan and became part of supper. "Pursued by people who bought shares in that phony Pick-Nine ticket."

"Is there anything other than sausages?" Ganley asked.

Taking dirty clothes to the launderette was one of the chores Ganley performed for Edith Maxwell. He was glad to help around the boarding house, it made him feel useful. So did the clarinet and piano duets. He'd been in Metrola for half a decade, in and out of

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various rooms, and was now going on two full years at the old frame house on Melon Lane.

Metrola was a far cry from Montreal. There, while living at home and taking care of his aging mother and father, he had managed a small gift shop. His parents died four months apart in the same dismal winter. With their passing, Ganley achieved the freedom to be a happy mediocrity. The insurance money would last a long time at the rate Ganley was nursing it. A succession of part-time jobs helped take care of expenses. Then he had drifted down across the undefended border to Metrola and had the luck to encounter Edith that night at Angelo Ruffin's bar when she came in to hassle Gus for his pay before he could invest it at the track.

Doing a wash at a modern launderette was, in Ganley's opinion, one of life's underrated pleasures. In the mini-mall ten minutes from the house on Melon Lane, there were rows of shiny washers and lots of giant driers, and change machines to take your dollars and give you quarters, and baskets on wheels with rails to take your hangers. And there was a sink with hot water and paper-towel dispensers so you could rub down the counter before you folded your clothes.

Ganley's every move was efficient as he loaded soiled garments into a pair of washers, one for darks and one for lights. The dirty clothes spooked him ever so slightly, redolent as they were of other people's sweat, and he held his breath and slung the stuff in while looking elsewhere. Which was why he had seen the bullet holes only after Gus's shirt came out of the drier.

Before then, he had ducked next door to the 7-Eleven for cinnamon coffee and an oatmeal chocolate-chip cookie. Browsing the Metrola *Herald,* he'd read yet another story of a child killing a sibling accidentally while playing with a family gun. Ganley hated guns.

Panhandlers outside the building were taking turns coming in and asking for money. A kid on crutches who moved quite well with his right leg off above the knee approached Ganley. "Excuse me, sir, I'm asking you for a dollar. This is not a religious appeal—I want the money for myself."

Ganley gave the boy two dollars and watched him swing-step away. The sight of the street people and their aimless misery put him in mind of Ruben Tracy, older brother of Tina, the airline hostess Ganley knew from Ruffin's place. Tina was everybody's friend. She carried on long conversations with Gus Maxwell when he was on duty behind the bar. She got on all right with Edith. She could raise

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some excitement in grey-haired Ganley himself if she felt like taking the trouble. But Angelo Ruffin was her main man.

Her brother Ruben, known as Spacey Tracy because he was a dedicated user of illegal substances, might descend someday to the sidewalks of this mall, or one like it. But when he asked for money, the plea would not be as direct as that of the one-legged boy.

An electronic display on the drier counted down the final seconds. A tone sounded as the drum stopped turning. Ganley waited for the last tumble, then opened the door and began pulling out the toasty garments with their fragrance of rinse. And here came the T-shirt with three dark holes grouped neatly in the chest. The dark stain that remained on the pale fabric certainly looked like blood. The shirt was white with blue shoulders and a blue lip on the breast pocket. Ganley had seen Gus in it several times.

So now, in Edith's kitchen, Ganley said, "Tell me what happened with the Pick-Nine ticket."

"Do you know what the Pick-Nine is?"

"You have to pick the winning horse in all nine races."

"That's right. It's very hard to do. Which is why there may be no winner for days. The pool builds up and eventually somebody can win a couple of hundred grand."

"What happened?"

Edith shoved the sausage pan off the gas and came to the table. In her tank-top and spandex tights, she looked awfully good for fifty-three years old. She was tugging at the wisps of her close-cropped hair above her eyebrows. "The way it works, you go to a betting window with your Pick-Nine slip after you've marked the numbers of the horses you've chosen in all nine races. The guy behind the window puts your slip in the computer and it prints a ticket showing those numbers. The combinations could total up to a couple of thousand bucks. Then Gus says he wants the ticket cancelled."

"Why?"

"So he doesn't have to pay any money. The clerk hits the cancel button, which means no bet. It's an electronic cancellation, the ticket still looks the same. He's supposed to keep the ticket and tear off a corner. An auditor collects all cancelled tickets at the end of the day. But this guy behind the window is in cahoots with Gus and gives him the cancelled ticket."

"I begin to see."

"Gus goes among his cronies as the afternoon progresses. Maybe

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his picks have been winnning in the early races. The ticket starts to look promising. Around the fourth race, he offers a share in it to somebody for a few hundred bucks. It's good odds because the pool is, say, three hundred thousand. So the sucker pays Gus the money. He wanders around and does the same thing with a half dozen people, until he's a few grand ahead on a bet he's never made."

"Got it," Ganley said. "As long as all nine horses don't come in, Gus is home free, because it's a losing ticket. But if they win—"

"Exactly. Then all those co-bettors look for Gus to cash the ticket and pay them off."

"Don't tell me."

"All nine came in. An incredible fluke. He's been getting away with the scam time and again, paying off the guy behind the window."

Ganley said, "When did you last see Gus?"

"Days ago. He wasn't at his place when I went to collect his laundry." The Maxwells gave each other a lot of freedom. Gus kept an apartment near Ruffin's bar. He slept there frequently, using it as a launching pad for his flights to the track. Once a week, Edith let herself in, grabbed his bag of dirty clothes, and brought it back to the house on Melon Lane. "I remember now," she said. "There were pants and a shirt balled up together on the floor—his shirt with the blue shoulders. I stuffed them in the bag without looking at them."

Her calm was making Ganley nervous. Maybe she knew more about this than she was letting on. "Shouldn't we call the cops?"

"What for?"

"It looks like somebody shot your husband, then stripped him and disposed of his body. I'd say that's worth a 911."

"If he's dead, he's dead," Edith said. "I'd rather not discuss his crooked betting practices with the boys in blue." She got up to lift a lid and peer in at the steaming potatoes.

The joint of Ganley's right thumb was calloused where the metal flange on the back of the clarinet rested. Edith sat on the piano stool, straight-backed. Ganley was standing behind her and to the left where he could see the music bathed in light from a tall brass lamp. The selection was "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." Edith kept the accompaniment flowing. Each time the melody came along, Ganley played the brief passage with the clearest tone he could produce, vibrato at a minimum. The performance wasn't half bad. Maybe a quarter.

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The doorbell buzzed. They were so close to the end that they continued to completion, picking up the tempo like somebody falling downstairs. Whoever was out there had the patience not to buzz again.

When she finished playing, Edith went to the door and let in Tina Tracy. "You guys are getting good," the young woman said. She was tall and pretty and very thin. Her motor ran continuously, putting out the energy required for her job as a stewardess for Transatlan Airways. "Where's Gus?" she said.

"We don't know," Edith told her.

"I'm worried about my brother. He told me Gus was in trouble and he was going to see if he could help him." Ruben Tracy was Angelo Ruffin's runner. He hung around the bar a lot when Gus was on duty and it wasn't busy.

Ganley said, "What did Ruben say about Gus?"

"That he ripped off some people at the track and they were after him. He was getting set to skip town."

"He never made it," Edith said.

Tina's lean face was tense. "Where is he?"

"Show her the shirt."

Ganley went for the perforated garment. Tina stiffened and looked away. "I don't want to see."

"It was in the bag of clothes Edith collected from Gus's apartment," he said. "I found it when I did the wash today. There are bloodstains."

"I didn't see any sign of Gus around the place when I collected his dirty laundry," Edith said. "Do you want coffee?"

"No, thanks."

"They might have taken the body out in the desert somewhere," Ganley said. "He'll be one of those they never find."

Tina looked at Edith. "You must feel terrible."

"Bad enough," Edith said quietly.

"Why not talk to Angelo?" Ganley asked Tina.

"What could he tell us?"

"Ruffin knows people who hang around racetracks. He may have heard something. I'll come with you."

She went outside to start her car while Ganley took apart his clarinet and packed it in its case. Edith said, "That girl likes you."

"She's only a kid."

"Give her some time. You're alone too much."

"I call it independence."

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"Independence is for countries. Take it from a lonely woman. Seldom as I saw Gus, he was the anchor in my life."

From behind the bar, Angelo Ruffin spotted Tina in the doorway. He raised his arm and leveled a finger at her. He kept pointing as she walked toward him between busy tables and took the tall chair near the cash register. With no place empty, Ganley stood close behind her. Ruffin knew what Tina liked to drink—he poured a shot of brandy on the rocks and brought it to her. "My busy season," he complained, "and Gus goes missing." The club owner's shirt was sticking to his shoulders. His broad face gleamed under flat black hair. "And where's your brother?"

"I was going to ask you."

Something was going on. Ruben was in Ruffin's bad books. Ganley suspected there was more to it than not showing up for work. He glanced at Tina. She was airy, sipping brandy.

Ganley ordered a beer. He tried to pay but Ruffin shook his head—his concentration was on Tina. "Did you talk to him?"

"I couldn't find him."

"When you find him, tell him I said he's in big trouble. He can run to his Uncle Gus, but he can't hide." Ruffin went to initial a check brought to him by a waiter.

The adjoining bar seat came open and Ganley slid onto it with his beer. "What's the Uncle Gus bit?"

"Angelo likes to own people. He hates the way Ruben clings to Gus—sleeping at his place, showing up here in Gus's clothes. I don't like it much, either." Tina changed her face to accommodate her companion. She did something with the knot in his tie. Now, her smile told him, he was exactly right. "Hey," she said, "what about Montreal?"

"Montreal?"

"You said you were going to tell me about your hometown."

Last time they talked, Ganley had been almost ready to open up with her. Now he felt less comfortable about it. "Montreal's a cosmopolitan city," he said. "You'd like it."

"Transatlan flies there. I can put in for tickets. Would you show me around?"

"Autumn is the time to go."

"Autumn's such a long way off." Her head turned and her eyes flickered around the crowded bar. She was like a traveler looking for the Departures board.

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"Let's try a theory," Ganley said.

"What about?"

"Gus Maxwell killed your brother."

"What?" She looked terrified. "I thought it was Gus who got killed."

"I'm working on another scenario."

"Why would Gus do that?"

"I don't know. I'm guessing. Angelo sounded angry just now. Suppose Ruben crossed Angelo, so Angelo paid Gus to kill him."

Tina's blink was almost audible. "You saw the blood on Gus's shirt!"

"I presumed it was Gus's blood because it was his shirt. But Ruben could have been wearing it. You said yourself he sometimes dresses in Gus's clothes." Ganley considered. "Maybe it was mistaken identity. He was at the apartment and the killer thought he was shooting Gus. They're the same size."

She frowned. "Here's another theory. Ruben killed Gus. Never mind switching the shirt."

"Why would your brother kill the guy who looks after him?"

"Ruben always needs money. Maybe they fought about it and Gus shot him."

"Gus doesn't have any money."

"You know that, but Ruben might not have. He thinks everybody's got money but him."

Ganley finished his beer. "Maybe it is Gus who's dead," he conceded. "But I don't see your brother doing it."

"So where is he?" Tina went to the bathroom, taking a makeup kit from her giant shoulderbag and leaving the bag on the seat. Ruffin was on it quickly, reaching over the bar to snatch it and stash it down behind the bar between cases of empty bottles. Tina was gone a long time. Ganley wanted another beer but Ruffin seemed to have disappeared. Ganley relaxed and listened to the music. The sound system was turned on to a big-band tape and some ferocious trumpeter was flaunting his high register all over "Spring Is Here."

Ganley thought about Edith Maxwell. As of now, she seemed to have no husband. Was it possible the attractive landlady was a murderess or that she paid somebody to get rid of Gus? Was her speech about Gus being her anchor a coverup? Was Ganley being promoted to man of the hour? He sure wanted the assignment.

And here was Tina Tracy, who might or might not like him as much as Edith said. She had sounded serious about spending time

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with him in Montreal. Her present schedule with Transatlan, back and forth to Heathrow, would give them sufficient freedom from each other. In his musings, Ganley caught movement among the beer cases. The light was dim, but he could make out Angelo bending to open the flap of Tina's shoulderbag and inserting a package wrapped in plastic. And another one.

When Tina returned from the washroom, she looked at the empty seat. "Who took my bag?"

"Ruffin put it in safekeeping."

The club owner came without being called. "You're asking to be ripped off," he told her. He dragged up the bag and shoved it her way.

"Thank you, Angelo," she singsonged in the voice of a penitent child.

Behind the wheel of her cute little Nash Metropolitan, Tina slipped into traffic and asked Ganley if he wanted something to eat. He shook his head: "Can we head around to Gus's apartment?"

"What for?"

"There's something I want to see."

"How do we get in?"

"I have a key." It was the one Edith had provided so he could deliver Gus's clean clothes back to the apartment.

"Tell me how to get there."

"Make a right at the next light."

She flipped the turn indicator three seconds before changing lanes. Law-abiding to a fault, thought Ganley.

The building looked sound asleep and they closed the car doors quietly. Ganley led the way inside. Climbing the dingy steps, only 40 watts of light in the stairwell, he couldn't help thinking how a body had probably been carried out this way.

Tina was on the same wavelength. "Do we have to do this?"

"It's important to me," he offered.

"Will he come back? Whoever killed Gus?"

"How should I know?"

"If he does, I'm ready." On the landing, she reached inside her bag and showed him a snub-nosed revolver. When he reacted, she said, "Don't look so shocked. Everybody carries a gun these days. It's been my comfort through a lot of scary airports late at night."

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Ganley let them inside. The apartment smelled of ripe fruit. He turned on the overhead light. The place was sparsely furnished in second-hand bamboo. There was no disorder. A neat stack of Daily Racing Forms occupied a corner of a foldable table, beside them a pile of programs from Metrola Park. The top one was open to the entries in the ninth race.

"If Gus was killed, I need to know where," Ganley said.

"What for?"

"It makes a difference." He began scanning the carpet, crouching, sliding a chair aside. "Help me, Tina. Check out the floor in the bedroom."

He thought she was going to refuse. Then she slung her bag on the settee and left the room. Ganley moved fast. He found one of the packages Ruffin had stashed. Holding it, squeezing the plastic wrap, he knew he was right. But to be sure, he took out his nailfile and stabbed the package. White powder appeared in the puncture.

"Is that what this is all about?" Tina was watching from the bedroom doorway.

"You're smuggling cocaine into London," he said. "Ruffin supplies it and you carry it over."

"Somebody has to do it."

Her smile—her thinness. "Big money?" he asked, managing to keep his voice level.

"Big for Angelo. Pretty good for me."

"You take a hell of a risk."

"Not really. People are paid to look the other way. How could it be otherwise?" She came and sat down beside her bag. "The demand is out of sight. Billions and billions of dollars' worth. Everybody wants it. Can you simply say it's illegal and the craving will go away? It's Prohibition all over again."

Ganley took the kilo of cocaine to the bathroom and found a Band-Aid. He used it to cover the puncture he'd made and brought the bandaged package back to Tina. "There," he said, "I've repaired the damage."

"Not all of it," she said. The bag was now on her lap.

"What else is there?"

"You know about me and Angelo. Our drug deal."

"Frankly, Scarlett," he said, "I don't give a damn."

"But it's too important for me to take your word." She let the bag slide. The gun was in her right hand, pointing directly at the neatly folded handkerchief in his breast pocket.

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"Suggestion," he said. "Let's find where the gamblers shot Gus. I'll stand on the stain and we can keep all the blood in the same place."

Tina bit her lip. She looked young and serious. "You may as well know the truth about that." She balanced the gun across her wrist. "Nobody killed Gus. Gus did the killing."

"Go on."

"Last month my dear brother Ruben lifted a key of coke from my apartment and sold it on the street. To protect him, I told Angelo I got ripped off in London. He was suspicious, but it's the only time I ever let him down so he wrote it off."

"And Ruben did it again."

"That's why Angelo was so mad tonight. It happened last week. I drove around and found Ruben here at Gus's place. He still had the stuff, so that was all right. We were yelling at each other when Gus came in. He was in a hurry. He said some people were after him, he was going to have to leave town. Ruben asked Gus to take him with him. Well, Gus refused. He didn't know Ruben. He could never take no for an answer. There was a lot of back and forth while Gus was packing. Then Ruben said he was going to follow Gus—it was a free country, he could go where he wanted."

"Gus shot Spacey over that?"

"There was more. Ruben brought out the package of cocaine. He threatened Gus he'd tell the cops he found it in Gus's apartment."

Ganley shook his head. "Gus is a grownup. Gus is bigger. He could leave and what's Ruben going to do? Gus could knock him down and take away the cocaine."

"You still don't get it. Maybe you never knew how much Gus hated my brother."

"He let him stay here."

"Because Ruben made a pest of himself and for whatever reason Gus couldn't say no. A lot of people despised Ruben. I'm glad he's dead. Truthfully. Growing up with him— Never mind, I felt this huge relief." Her eyes went calm and wide. "Gus sent me away so I wouldn't have to see it happen. I did as I was told."

"So you never saw Gus shoot Ruben. Did you talk to Gus later?"

"No. But he must have done it."

"You believe that? He was soft-hearted enough to let him stay here but hard-hearted enough to kill him in cold blood?"

"Gus hated Ruben, I told you. That's why he shot him three times when once would have done."

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Ganley gave her a searching look. Finally, she said, "What?"

"Three times?"

"Yes."

"*I* know Ruben was shot three times because I saw the bullet holes in his shirt. So does Edith Maxwell. How do you know?"

"You showed me the shirt at Edith's place."

"No, I started to, but you wouldn't look. You shouldn't even know it had anything more than bloodstains."

Movement in the apartment doorway was subtle, Ganley hardly noticed it. Tina's back was to the door. "You're a stupid man." She tightened her grip on the gun. "You should have pretended you believed me about Gus. I might have let you promise to forget the drug business. But me offing Ruben—I can't let you carry that around."

"You're going to have to."

"Forget it."

"You have no choice. Not with Edith Maxwell right behind you—holding Gus's 12-gauge shotgun."

"Nice try," Tina said. "But I saw the movie. And I read the book twice."

Edith—empty-handed—struck like a cobra, grasping Tina's wrist with both hands and thrusting the gun toward the ceiling. It went off once, shattering the overhead light fixture. The room went dark. Ganley moved toward the struggle and took a kick between the legs. He was on the floor, groaning, and couldn't understand why his landlady was calling to him, "Dress her! Dress her!" The gun went off again. A piece of furniture went over—a chair, he thought. The front door opened, slammed, and footsteps ran down the stairs.

After a few moments' silence, Ganley managed to whisper, "I take it that wasn't you leaving, Edith."

"I'm on the floor," she said. "But I'm not dead. How about you?"

"Me, neither," Ganley told her. "How come you showed up?"

"I got lonely, so I drove around to the club. I was just in time to see you getting into her car. I followed you. Next thing I knew, I was up here and listening from the hall."

Ganley crawled to a table lamp and switched it on. "Gus is alive. My guess is he came in just after Tina killed Ruben and saw the chance to have the racetrack gamblers believe he was dead. He stripped his clothes off Ruben, loaded him in his car, and took off."

"So where is Ruben's body?"

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"In the desert somewhere. Down an abandoned mineshaft." Ganley tried standing. He made it to a crouch. "Time to bring in the police?"

"Time and a half," Edith said. She got up and went to the phone.

As she dialed, Ganley said, "Why were you yelling at me to dress Tina?"

"Dress Tina?"

"You kept saying, 'Dress her, dress her.' "

"I was saying 'dresser.' Gus keeps a gun in the dresser in the bedroom. I wanted you to get it."

Ganley went and looked. It was there, under packaged shirts, an ugly, swollen thing of blue steel with a handle that looked like a hammer. Edith was behind him. She took the gun and put it in her purse. "I'd better not leave it here," she said. "Gus doesn't have a license for it."

The police were not happy. They weren't sure they could forgive Edith her reticence in trying to conceal Gus's dishonesty at the track. But they conceded that the murder of Ruben Tracy wasn't the result of the Pick-Nine coverup. On the other hand, Ganley's description of the cocaine connection, Ruffin to Tina to Heathrow, was a windfall and the department got on it right away. Ruffin was picked up three days later at the home of a friend in Phoenix. And who was with him? Tina Tracy. Gus Maxwell and Ruben Tracy were still among the missing.

Weeks later, Ganley was at the launderette, taking things from the drier, when he noticed a bulge in the pocket of one of Edith's blouses. Not for the first time, he'd allowed something extraneous to go through the washing machine. He took the crisp wafer of paper from the pocket. Unfolding it carefully, he saw it was a note.

Although it had been soaked and dried, the handwriting was still legible. It read: "Edie, honey—I want you to think about what I said. I hid the kid's body, I'm an accessory, I can never come back. There's no guarantee this guy Ganley will keep his mouth shut. You have my gun from the apartment. Use it. On a street where it could look like he was mugged. Then come and join me in Florida. They have good racing here. I'll buy you a new piano."

Ganley left everything on hangers and walked. He was heading for the nearest police station. People getting out of his way thought the grey-haired man seemed to be marching. They couldn't feel the beat or hear the dismal words that drove him on.

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ON OUR COVER

Telly Savalas, best known for his portrayal of tough New York cop Theo Kojak, was born Aristotle Savalas in Garden City, New York. He attended Holy Cross Institute in Connecticut and Long Island's Sewanhaka High School, interrupting his education to enlist in the Army at the outbreak of World War II. After three years of service, he resumed his formal schooling at Columbia University, where his major was psychology.

After graduating from college, he joined the Information Service of the State Department, and two years later was appointed executive director. When the State Department moved its information branch from New York to Washington, Savalas moved to ABC Television as senior director of News and Specials. He created the *Your Voice of America* series, which won a Freedoms Foundation Award and a Peabody Award for the network.

His acting career began when he was unable to help a theatrical agent find an actor who could voice a particular European accent for a role on a live television production. Savalas decided to audition for the part himself and got it. After appearing on only three television shows, he was chosen by Burt Lancaster and director John Frankenheimer to play the role of Feto Gomez in the motion picture *The Birdman of Alcatraz,* a performance for which he received an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor in 1962.

Many character portrayals followed, including roles in such films as *Cape Fear, The Greatest Story Ever Told, Beau Geste, The Dirty Dozen, Crooks and Coronets,* and *On Her Majesty's Secret Service.* On television, he has appeared in such films as *Mongo's Back in Town, Visions,* and *The Marcus-Nelson Murders,* from which his character of Kojak was derived.

Savalas starred on the *Kojak* series from 1973 to 1978, and in that time won an Emmy Award for Best Actor, a Golden Globe Award, and a People's Choice Award. The series has recently been revived as part of *The ABC Saturday Mystery.* An interesting addition to the *Kojak* cast is Pamela, Kojak's secretary, played by Savalas's daughter Candace, who has taken a one-semester leave from studying for a Master's degree in psychology to appear on the series.

In the past few years, he developed and premiered a nightclub act at the Sahara Hotel in Lake Tahoe. Between film and television commitments, Savalas enjoys playing golf and is active in public affairs and world travel.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

At the age of about twelve, I decided I had outgrown comic books and threw away a collection—including issues of *Batman, Superman,* and various Walt Disney products—I could probably retire on today. Perhaps due in part to the trauma of this quickly regretted folly, I haven't paid much attention to comics since, but some current products in the mystery field convince me I should have. For one thing, the target audience of today's comic books is not necessarily children and adolescents, as the European and Latin American tradition of the graphic novel for adults makes inroads into the American market. Max Allan Collins and Terry Beatty's *Ms. Tree* has been on the scene for some years as a strong comic-book equivalent of the hard-boiled mystery, and now there is an equally admirable comic version of the more classical cerebral mystery.

The Maze Agency, created by Mike W. Barr (who made his fictional debut in *EQMM* with first story #385, "Crime at the Comiconvention," May 1973), recounts the adventures of beautiful private eye Jennifer Mays and her true-crime-writing cohort (and romantic interest) Gabe Webb. Barr is a student of Ellery Queen, and all the Maze Agency stories have fairly clued puzzle plots in the EQ tradition. In fact, issue #9 (Innovation Publishing, 3622 Jacob Street, Wheeling, WV 26003; $1.95) commemorates the 60th anniversary of *The Roman Hat Mystery* (1929) with a guest appearance by Ellery himself in a tale of New Age murder, "The English Channeler Mystery: A Problem in Deduction." As well as being expertly written by Barr, the story owes its effective visual presentation to a whole team of artists: Adam Hughes (penciller), Rick Magyar (inker), Addis and Williams (letterers), the Vanhook Studios (colorists), and David Campiti (editor). When I was collecting comics, these extensive, almost cinematic credits were not included—it's good to see all the team members getting their due.

**** Paco Ignacio Taibo II: *An Easy Thing,* translated from the Spanish by William I. Neuman, Viking, $16.95. Mexico City private eye Hector Belascoaran Shayne makes his English-language debut in this novel by the current president of the International Association of Crime Writers. It's an example of the modular mystery, alternating three unrelated investigations, an approach most often seen in police procedurals but occasionally used in private-eye fiction by writers like Bill Pronzini and George Chesbro. The narrative style, the humor, the background, and the characters also have equivalents in other North American detective fiction, but Taibo's is a fresh voice, his approach to the material dis-

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tinctive. Neuman's translation is the best kind: it makes you forget he was there at all.

*** Elizabeth Peters: *Naked Once More,* Warner, $17.95. The world of writers, agents, and publishers is deftly satirized in the latest adventure of Jacqueline Kirby, librarian turned bestselling novelist. Here she is chosen to write a sequel to the blockbuster novel *Naked in the Ice,* whose author Kathleen Darcy vanished seven years before and is presumed dead. Fans of the Golden Age puzzle mystery will appreciate the generosity of the clues and their explication in a traditional climactic gathering of the suspects.

*** L. J. Washburn: *Dead-Stick,* TOR, $16.95. Lucas Hallam, a former Texas Ranger who divides his time between western stunt work and private detection in 1920s Hollywood, is one of the most enjoyable new sleuths to debut in recent years. Here he investigates a series of suspicious accidents plaguing the filming of a World War I aviation drama called *Death to the Kaiser!* Hollywood of the Thirties and after has been amply mined in detective fiction, but Washburn almost has the Twenties to herself.

*** Mark Denning: *Ransom,* Pocket Books, $4.50. Magazine writer Roger Evans arrives home to find an unauthorized visitor to his Los Angeles apartment has left a package containing $250,000. From there, he becomes involved in a complicated case of international intrigue that provides even more pressing concerns than what to do with the money. Denning is a pro who knows how to keep the reader involved. As John Stevenson, he is a well known reviewer and writing teacher.

*** Joyce Porter: *Dover and the Claret Tappers,* Foul Play/Countryman, $16.95. Chief Inspector Wilfrid Dover, the most hilariously revolting series sleuth extant, is held for ransom by the kidnap gang of the title, who find to their dismay Scotland Yard is in no hurry to get their disagreeable colleague back. The first U.S. publication of this 1976 novel has been surprisingly long delayed. The plot is nothing extraordinary, but the relationship of Dover and his put-upon subordinate Sergeant MacGregor is enjoyable as ever for those who can appreciate Porter's distinctively British brand of humor.

*** Donald E. Westlake: *Tomorrow's Crimes,* Mysterious, $18.95. This collection of nine short stories and a novel brings together the author's occasional ventures into science fiction and fantasy, all of which have at least some criminous crossover. *Anarchaos,* first published as a paperback original in 1967 under the pseudonym Curt Clark, comprises a little over half the book. Rolf Malone comes to the planet of the title, where anarchy is the chosen political system (or non-system), to find out who killed his brother. All the stories are thought-provoking, if more overtly didactic than most of Westlake's mysteries. Among them is the Edgar-nominated "In at the Death," which appeared in *EQMM* (November 1978) as "This Is Death."

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*** Kingsley Amis: *The Crime of the Century,* Mysterious, $16.95. The distinguished British novelist who has periodically invaded the crime-fiction field—with the James Bond pastiche, *Colonel Sun,* and the Thirties period piece, *The Riverside Villas Murder*—returns with a fanciful serial-killer mystery, more in the spirit of Agatha Christie's *The ABC Murders* or Philip MacDonald's *The Mystery of the Dead Police* than more recent examples. The story was first published in 1975 as a five-part serial in the London *Sunday Times,* with readers invited to write the last chapter and solve the mystery. Though calling it the best prize-contest mystery ever may constitute faint praise, it very nearly stands on its own as a mystery artifice. Both Amis's solution and the prize-winner by Howard Martin are included.

** Mickey Spillane: *The Killing Man,* Dutton, $17.95. Several writers and critics whose opinion I respect believe Spillane, along with being a unique commercial phenomenon, is a good and important writer of mystery fiction. I've never been able to see it, and the first new Mike Hammer novel in almost twenty years doesn't change my mind. Spillane can write a good passage of atmospheric urban description, though. This from the first paragraph is the best thing in the book: "I could smell the rain. It was the kind that hung above the orderly piles of concrete until it was soaked with dust and debris and when it came down it wasn't rain at all, but the sweat of the city."

Not amenable to rating is an unusual item from Martha Grimes, *Send Bygraves* (Putnam, $15.95), a book-length poem simultaneously celebrating and sending up the classical British mystery, of which the author is an American proponent. Both the verse (best read aloud) and the numerous illustrations by Devis Grebu have considerable evocative charm and will bear revisiting. This is a collector's item.

The best guidebook to the works of Agatha Christie, first published in 1984, is available in a newly updated trade-paperback edition. Dennis Sanders' and Len Lovallo's *The Agatha Christie Companion* (Berkley, $12.95) synopsizes all the books and story collections, describes stage and screen adaptations, and offers a variety of lists of titles in which continuing characters appear. Another secondary source devoted Christie fans will want to have is Anne Hart's *The Life and Times of Hercule Poirot* (Putnam, $19.95), the most thorough biographical consideration yet of the great Belgian detective.

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a *NEW* John Francis Cuddy story by

JEREMIAH HEALY

After the workout, Cuddy stopped to buy the week's staples at the Prudential Star Market. When he returned to the condo about 9:30, there was a brown Ford sedan double-parked in front of the building. It had the kind of antenna the driver doesn't need for easy listening.

A thirtyish, broad-shouldered woman got out from behind the wheel. "Cuddy, don't you ever answer your phone?"

"Cross, I look to you like I've been in to hear it?"

She gave him a sour smile. "You got something in the bag that'll spoil, take it upstairs. Otherwise, the lieutenant wants to see you. Don't take the time to change. I'll sign out another unit while they fumigate this one . . ."

THE THREE MUSKETEERS

by JEREMIAH HEALY

The first Monday of February started with a parking ticket for stopping in a snow-emergency zone and an irate phone call from a grandmother in Wiscasset, Maine, who couldn't understand why I hadn't found her runaway grandson, a kid about as traceable in Boston as the smoke from yesterday's cigarettes. I was just hanging up when Vincent Biaggi came into my office, closing JOHN FRANCIS CUDDY, CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS so quietly I barely heard the click.

"Mr. Cuddy?"

"Yes," I said, rising and shaking hands with him. "You're prompt."

"I try to be."

Somewhere in his early thirties, Biaggi was just under six feet, with sharp features. He wore an expensive razored haircut and

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draped a black-cashmere overcoat on his arm. Muted glen-plaid Brooks Brothers suit, buttoned-down white shirt, regimental tie. A man who had confidence in his own competence. Once we sat down, however, he fidgeted in my office-surplus chair. Biaggi didn't seem used to fidgeting.

"How can I help you, Mr. Biaggi?"

"I'm not sure you can."

"Well, what's the problem?"

He stared at me.

"Domestic? Because I don't—"

"Domestic? Oh, you mean like divorce. No, no. I'm already divorced, and it's nothing like that."

"Business, then?"

"No. Well—"

I leaned back until my chair touched the windowsill. "Mr. Biaggi, we have to start somewhere."

"Yes, yes you're right. I'm acting in a way I'd never tolerate from one of my team. Indecisive. It's just—well, how much do you charge?"

I thought I saw it. Biaggi had a problem he'd already talked over with another investigator. Calling me earlier for an appointment was his way of window-shopping, to see if he'd been offered a fair price elsewhere.

I said, "Three hundred a day, even if it ends up being just a half day. All expenses, including but not limited to travel, lodging, and meals."

"You sound like an attorney, Mr. Cuddy."

"I had a year of law school. Long time ago."

"Yes, well—"

I decided to wait him out.

His mouth resolved into a determined line. "Mr. Cuddy, I'm sorry. I'm wasting your time here. I haven't made up my mind yet, and I'm experienced enough to have known that without coming here. It's just that I'm starting a new project at the office and this is the only time I could get away during the day."

"Tell you what, Mr. Biaggi." I yanked open the center drawer and spun one of my cards over to him. "You make up your mind, you give me a call and we can talk about it. Whatever it is."

He picked up the card, started to put it away, then pulled out a pen instead. "Can I have your home number?"

"You can reach me here."

"Please. I may have to call you tonight about going forward."

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I counted to five silently, then gave him the number, repeating the digits because he seemed nervous writing them down. He took out some sort of calendar, covered in burnished leather but fairly unwieldy, and slipped my card under a paper clip that kept the thing opened to the current week.

Biaggi stood, thanked me, and left.

Mentally, I kissed him off, then spent the rest of the day into the evening trying to find Woodrow from Wiscasset. I had prime rib at J. C. Hillary's on Boylston Street, a great saloon about three blocks from the condo I was renting from a doctor off in Chicago on a residency. When I got home about ten, my telephone tape showed one message in its green fluorescent window. Replaying it, I was surprised to hear:

"Mr. Cuddy. This is Vincent Biaggi at eight-oh-four on Monday night. I'm sorry I acted so stupidly today, but—I'm under some pressure. I need to speak with you, but I'm heading out and I can't call you later. Please call me after two P.M. tomorrow at my office."

He rattled off the number. I wrote it down, then rewound the tape to erase and reset. I read *The New York Times* from that morning about events that happened on Saturday and Sunday, then went to sleep.

Tuesday dawned bright, the first clear day since the January thaw. I laced up my running shoes, pulled on a cotton turtleneck and shorts, and shrugged into the Gore-tex two-piece I'd allowed myself for Christmas. I crossed Storrow on the Fairfield Street footbridge and did a leisurely six miles along the Charles River, the first three into a biting northwest wind. The macadam paths were packed solid with the snow and sleet of the previous week, which made jogging easier rather than harder. Once you got the hang of it.

I followed the run with a workout at the Nautilus facility down the street from the condo. It's a lot more pleasant to shop at the Prudential Star Market in the early morning, so after the workout I stopped to buy the week's staples. When I returned to the condo about 9:30, there was a brown Ford sedan double-parked in front of the building. It had the kind of antenna the driver doesn't need for easy listening.

A thirtyish, broad-shouldered woman got out from behind the wheel. "Cuddy, don't you ever answer the phone?"

"Cross, I look to you like I've been in to hear it?"

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She gave me a sour smile. "You got something in the bag that'll spoil, take it upstairs. Otherwise, the lieutenant wants to see you. Don't take the time to change. I'll sign out another unit while they fumigate this one."

Lieutenant Robert Murphy is older, stockier, and gruffer than I am. Given the crap he had to swallow back when the department didn't consider blacks executive material, the gruffer part was to be expected.

"Garbage man found a citizen dead in an alley down by Quincy Market this morning. Medical Examiner says multiple stab wounds. The uniforms responding didn't find a wallet or watch, but the guy had this fancy calendar thing in his breast pocket, your name down for yesterday afternoon, and your card with home number in handwriting under a clip. Tell me about it."

I related everything I could remember about Biaggi coming to see me, focusing on his uncertainty.

"So he never told you what was bothering him?"

"No. M.E. peg a time of death?"

Murphy shook his head. "Biaggi was in the snow behind a dumpster, but he'd been out carousing with a couple of his college friends from seven till almost eleven, so we figure eleven to twelve, maybe one at the outside."

"These friends said Biaggi was with them from seven on?"

"Till eleven, when they split to head home. Why?"

"I got a message on my tape last night. Biaggi's voice, telling me it was eight-oh-four but I wouldn't be able to reach him because he was 'heading out.' "

Murphy turned that around a while. "Could be he meant heading out for another bar. The friends say they were pub-crawling, making dinner on the free counter stuff at the places they hit."

"Maybe he called from a good phone booth, but I didn't hear any background music or bar noise on the tape. And from what he said to me, Biaggi seemed like a guy who kept track of things like the time. These friends from work?"

"One. A guy named Michael Doyle. The other guy, Sandor Fried, no."

"Biaggi said something about a team. What'd he do for a living?"

"He was a project leader for a consulting group called Harbor Consulting and Research. Down by Lewis Wharf."

"You been over there?"

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"Yeah. They keep cops' hours."

Meaning I didn't. "Any help?"

"No. The dude's secretary went numb when we told her, then started crying like she meant to raise the mean high-water mark."

"Check on the ex-wife?"

"Tara Wheaton. One of Biaggi's friends gave me her address up in Marblehead. She didn't seem too broken up about it. Came to the door in a robe, claims she was on a flight from L.A. last night."

"Business or pleasure?"

"Business. Ms. Wheaton's a stewardess. We're confirming her story, but unless something comes up this here's going down as a mugging gone rough."

"Mind if I ask around a little?"

"For free?"

"Looks that way."

Sandor Fried's office told me he'd left for the day. Murphy had a home address for him in Wellesley. After I showered and changed, I drove out there.

Wellesley is the kind of chic suburb you'd build ten miles west of a city. Fried's house fit right in, a big colonial on two nicely landscaped acres.

The front door was answered by a gaunt woman wearing a black wig that should have had some grey in it if it was intended to appear natural. "What do you want?"

"Mrs. Fried?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"My name is John Cuddy." I showed her my identification. "I'm looking into the death of Vincent Biaggi, and Lieutenant Murphy directed me to your husband."

Her mouth moved the way a cow's does chewing cud. "Come in, then. Sandy's very upset already—don't make matters worse, all right?"

She pointed me to a sunken living room while she climbed a half staircase. The parlor floor was covered by clashing Kerman rugs. Disproportionate modern art loomed from the walls. Couches and chairs in blue leather were attended by tables of glass and brass. Not a place designed for kicking off your shoes.

The mantel had photos of two children, a boy and a girl, at various ages up to young teens. No shots of Fried or his wife.

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From an upper level, I heard a man's voice say tiredly, "Sylvia, please," then Mrs. Fried's: "You got a choice, Sandy. Either I hear what he says from down there or I hear what he says from up here:"

After some clumping on the stairs, a defeated man shambled into the room, followed closely by Mrs. Fried. Thinning black hair combed heroically from above one ear up and over the top of his head. Pinched eyes, a large open face, and a bearlike physique under sweatshirt and sweatpants.

"You're—?"

"John Cuddy, Mr. Fried. As I explained to your wife—"

"It's about Vinnie, right?"

"Right."

He became agitated. "I already told the police. We didn't see anything."

"By we, you mean Michael Doyle and you?"

"Right, right."

Mrs. Fried said, "You want my opinion, this tragedy doesn't happen if the three of you behaved like responsible adults instead of fraternity feebs."

"Sylvia, it was our one night out, okay?"

"Stupid."

"It was a tradition. We always—"

"Traditions can't be stupid?"

I said, "Mr. Fried, maybe if you just told me what happened last night."

"I'll try. Sit, sit, please."

Sandor Fried and I sat. Mrs. Fried stayed standing, arms folded across her chest, watching for openings.

"Vinnie, Mike, and I went to college together. We were real close, bio-sci and all, but afterward, with business pressures, we didn't see that much of each other."

"You said bio-sci?"

"Yeah. We majored in Biological Sciences. I went into pharmaceutical publishing. Mike tried med school, but he—that didn't work out. Vinnie got into consulting first, then Mike came into it later."

"Can you tell me about this tradition you had?"

"Sure. We decided to kind of revive something we did in college. Go to the bars and watch Monday Night Football."

Mrs. Fried said, "Except the three musketeers here didn't stop when football stopped. Oh, no, it's Monday, they've got to kill brain cells."

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"Sylvia, do you mind?" Fried turned back to me. "We went out last night, must have been about seven when I got to HCR—Harbor Consulting, where I picked up Vinnie and Mike. We went to the Market, hit some bars, then said goodbye." Fried stopped. "God, that's a hard way to think about it. We said goodbye about eleven, maybe a little before."

"You were home eleven thirty-five, smelling like a distillery."

I said, "While you were at the bars, was anyone acting oddly?"

"Oddly?"

"Any other customer. Sizing you up or anything?"

"Oh. No, not that I noticed."

"Can you give me the sequence of bars?"

Closing his eyes, Fried seemed to concentrate. "Michael's Waterfront, because it's right by HCR there, then over to the market area itself. The Lord Bunbury, Donovan's, Lily's—no, no, we went down to the Ames Plow first, then Lily's."

"Anybody overdo it?"

"What, drinking? No, there's nothing like that with us."

"I'll bet," from Mrs. Fried.

"Did Biaggi say where he was going after leaving you?" I asked her husband.

"No. Not to me. He's free to—he was divorced, you know?"

"Fraternity feebs, all of you."

Deciding that Mr. Fried had taken enough from both Mrs. Fried and me, I thanked them and left.

Tara Wheaton lived in a cluster of duplex condominiums that overlooked a yacht club and the expanse of mansions on Marblehead Neck, across the winter-empty harbor. Her building was halfway up the slope from the water. There were no locks on the entryway doors, so I climbed the stairs to her unit and knocked.

The woman who opened the door was about five foot seven, with lustrous brown hair and hooded green eyes. She smiled and said, "You're John Cuddy?"

"Yes, but without more security downstairs you might not want to give a stranger the name of a visitor you're expecting."

The smile grew lazy. "I've gotten a lot better at making judgments since I got divorced. Come on in."

The first level contained a combination living room/dining room and a glass wall with sliding door to a balcony offering a teasing peek of the Neck over the condo roofs closer to the waterfront.

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She said, "Like the view?"

"Impressive."

"I've always liked the ocean, but we bought this place just after we were married because there was no upkeep, and now you can't touch a single-family along the water." She gestured to the sectional furniture. "Have a seat."

We sat facing each other in the L-shaped arrangement. "I really appreciate your taking the time to see me under the circumstances, Ms. Wheaton."

"Tara."

"Tara."

She rose a little, tucking one leg under the other. "Look, let's not play games for what you might think is my benefit. Vinnie and I were married, Vinnie and I got divorced. I'm sorry he's dead, but I'm not exactly crushed. Okay?"

"Okay."

"So why did you want to see me?"

"After the divorce, did you and Biaggi stay on good terms?"

"Good terms." She thought about it. "I guess so. I mean, we could talk on the phone without screaming at each other. That was part of the problem, actually."

"Talking on the phone?"

"No. No, I mean while we were married. Vinnie just wasn't the—most passionate guy around."

As I thought about a next question, Wheaton said, "Actually, I have to take that back. He was passionate enough about his job. And about studying back in school. It's just that work was all he was passionate about."

"You met each other in college?"

"Yeah. Sandy, Mike, and Vinnie were together from the beginning. They were seniors when I was a freshman. I met Mike first. He introduced me to Vinnie."

"Mike Doyle."

"Right."

"Did you date Doyle first?"

"Kind of. Well—" She played with the cuff of her slacks. "You have to remember, this was back in the mid-Seventies. I think Mike expected me to hop into bed with him. He was okay, but not special enough for me."

"You and Biaggi married in college?"

"Right after. Stupid thing to do, since I already signed up to see

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some of the world. But to be honest with you, it worked better that way."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, what Vinnie really wanted was kind of a guaranteed date more than a lifemate. He wanted somebody who was around on a regular basis, but not really a wife. A wife would cut a little too much into his work time. So, with me being gone a lot but here often enough, it was perfect."

"What soured it?"

"Oh, I got tired of flying, so I left the airline to become a housespouse. Plus, I was pushing thirty, starting to think about having kids. Vinnie wasn't really into that, and with me being home a lot, I started to realize just how little we had. As a couple."

"So you got divorced?"

"Right. Real—amicable, as the lawyers said. I got this place, because to tell you the truth he wanted to be closer in to the job anyway. It's ironic, actually."

"Ironic?"

"Yeah. I mean, that Monday-night thing with Sandy and Mike is about the only thing he did for fun, I bet, and it got him killed."

"Anybody you know who might have benefited from that?"

"Benefited?"

"Yes."

"You mean, like if it wasn't some mugger?"

"That's what I mean."

She hugged herself and settled deeper into the cushions. "The police—they think it might be—"

"You never know. Anybody come to mind?"

"Lord, I don't think so. Vinnie was a hard worker, but all his family's gone and—I don't think he really knew anybody outside work and the guys."

"Sandy and Mike."

"Right."

"What do you know about them?"

"Well, Mike, like I said, was okay but nothing special. He knew it, too."

"How do you mean?"

"He's just the kind of guy—he's always going to be a B-plus, never an A, you know? He couldn't hack it in med school, got his job at HCR because Vinnie vouched for him, that kind of thing."

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"Private life?"

"We all used to go out sometimes, kind of triple-date. Mike would never be with the same girl twice, and she'd always be kind of CBA."

"CBA?"

"Yeah. Cheap but alluring. Nothing upstairs. It was like he went through them to prove something."

"How about Sandy Fried?"

"Sandy? Just a teddy-bear. A great guy who made the mistake of marrying the first girl who was nice to him. Has kids he adores and a wife—you meet Sylvia?"

"Yes."

"Then enough said."

"How about you?"

"Me?"

"Yes. You benefit from Biaggi's death?"

The lazy smile. "You're direct about it, anyway."

I waited her out.

"No, I don't. Just the opposite, in fact. Vinnie agreed to give me alimony—'rehabilitative' alimony, I think they call it. Since I'd left the airline to make a home for him. I had six months of it left, but the deal with the lawyers was that if Vinnie died, the money stopped, and I can't claim anything from his estate or whatever. So I sure didn't want to see him die."

"I thought you said you were back with the airline?"

"I am. After Vinnie and I split, they took me back."

"But you still got the alimony."

"For a while. It's been a nice cushion, but I'm finding flying as a single woman isn't so bad, really, even with the AIDS scare and all."

"Well," I said, rising, "thanks for your time."

She leaned back in the sectional, uncrossing her arms and tossing her head toward the harbor behind her. "So you like the view, huh?"

"Nice."

"Even nicer from upstairs."

"I'll take your word for it."

The door to Michael Doyle's office was swung half open. I could see the heavy weathered beams and exposed red brick that had been touched up during the renovation of worthless wharf buildings to pricy office space. I knocked on the jamb.

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"Mr. Cuddy! Mike Doyle. Come on in. Pleasure to meet you. Though I wish it were under better circumstances."

Doyle was medium height, with reddish-brown hair and agreeable features perpetually arranged in a "can-do" smile. He came across as the kind of guy you'd hope would join the family business. "What can I help you with here?" he said.

"I've already spoken with Sandor Fried. I wonder if you could tell me what you remember about last night."

"Sure." Doyle repeated everything about the evening that Fried told me, even the bars in the same order.

"Biaggi have any enemies?"

"Vinnie? Just the opposite. Not the most gregarious guy in the world, maybe, but always helping people out."

"When did he start here?"

"Oh, let's see. 'Eighty-four sometime."

"You started together?"

"Ah, no. Actually, Vinnie beat me by about a year."

"He help you get your job?"

The perpetual smile seemed to falter a bit. "Yes, he did. Like I said, always helping people out."

"What do you do here, exactly?"

"If you mean HCR itself, lots of things. If you mean me in particular, I consult with and advise bio-tech companies."

"Gene-splicing, that kind of thing?"

"Well, yes, sometimes. But more the marketing and development angles."

"And Biaggi?"

"The same, only different. I don't want to appear evasive, but we have a lot of sensitive matters under our wings, so to speak."

"Then Biaggi did bio-tech, too?"

The smile waggled again. "Yes. We were lab partners back in school, and we did pretty much the same sort of work here."

"But he got here first."

Doyle paused, then, very evenly, said, "Yes."

We were interrupted by an older Japanese woman with a trace of an accent. "Michael, see if you can snap Linda out of her trance. She's got to retrieve Vincent's computer notes so you can get up to speed on this immediately. We're in Conference Room Two."

"Right away, Chieko."

After the woman had left us, I said, "Linda was Vincent's secretary?"

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"Right."

"And 'this' is the new project Biaggi was shepherding?"

"Uh-huh. Look, I don't mean to be rude, but—"

"I understand. Can you point me out of here?"

"Sure."

Outside his office, he was gesturing down and to the right when a young woman with a plain face but striking figure burst upon us from a subsidiary hallway. The face remark may have been unkind, because her makeup was smeared by tears and kleenex.

She nearly collapsed against Doyle, sobbing. "Oh, Michael, what should I do? What should I do?"

"Hey, Linda, it's going to be a tough time for all of us." Doyle shot me a What-can-*I*-do look that contained something more than embarrassment and less than sympathy. I left him to snap her out of it.

I'd parked a block from HCR. From my car, I could see the main entrance of the wharf building clearly.

Linda came out at 3:30 and flagged down a taxi on Commercial Street. I followed to a small apartment house in the North End. She paid the cabbie and entered the lobby. If she wasn't so upset, she could have walked it in ten minutes.

I gave her a half hour to settle in, then went to the mailboxes. There were no Lindas, the only first initial "L" belonging to an L. Duran in Apartment H. I pushed the other buttons till someone unseen negligently buzzed me into the building.

Apartment H was third floor rear. No view, but private. I banged on the door. Linda Duran's voice came from the other side of a peephole. "Who are you?"

I held up my identification, wondering if the convex lens distorted it beyond reading. "My name's John Cuddy, Ms. Duran. I'm investigating the death of Vincent Biaggi, and I think you want to talk with me. Now."

Doyle was livid, shocking even the HCR receptionist. "Where the hell do you get off pulling me out of a meeting! I saw you yesterday, without an appointment, and answered your questions."

"Mike, I thought it would be easier for you this way. I would have sent Linda, but I'm told she called in sick this morning."

"Would you please just tell me what you want?"

"Sure. It seems you've got another meeting to attend."

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"What? What other meeting?"

"With Lieutenant Murphy and Sandy Fried. In Conference Room One. I'm sure you know the way."

Doyle entered in front of me. By the expression on Fried's face, I guessed Mike was shooting daggers at his college pal.

After we all were seated, Murphy said, "I'd like to get some things straightened out. Just so everybody knows the score, anyone here is free to leave any time they want." Nobody got up.

The lieutenant tilted his head toward me. "Cuddy here had a little talk with Linda Duran yesterday afternoon."

Fried looked at Doyle. Doyle glared at me.

I said, "Seems that Linda kind of clouds everybody's story."

When neither responded, I went on. "Seems Linda and Sandy have been seeing each other. Only Sandy's married, so it had to be on the sly. Monday nights were a good time."

Fried said, "No. Oh, God, no."

Doyle said, "Shut up, Sandy."

"Yeah, Sandy, listen to your friend, let Cuddy speak his peace."

"Thanks, Lieutenant. Seems Mike and Vinnie kept the tradition alive, though, partly to cover for old Sandy with Sylvia back in Wellesley. Great cover, too. Explains booze on the breath, the scent of perfume in the clothes, and all that kind of stuff. Problem, though, for Sandy: Vinnie gets killed, and by the time Sandy hears about it he's already told the wife it was just another boisterous night out with the boys."

Fried said, "Does Sylvia know?"

Murphy said, "Not yet. Now be quiet, listen to the man."

"So Sandy calls Mike, and Mike helpfully squares their stories so that Sandy's still covered. Sure, it'll throw the police off a little on possible time of death, especially since the killer took away not just the wallet but the watch, too, which might have broken and revealed the time of the attack. But, hell, it was just another mugging, no witnesses, so the cops were never going to catch the killer anyway. Right, Sandy?"

Doyle said, "Doesn't wash. I was with Vinnie till almost eleven."

"Sorry, Mike. Detective Cross and I spent most of last night running down the Monday-night bartenders. Four of them work Tuesdays, too, so it wasn't as tough as it sounds. We caught the last one at his house this morning. And guess what?"

Fried had stopped looking at anything but his hands twisting in

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his lap. Doyle still glared at me, the big vein pulsing at his temple.

I said, "Turns out you three were pretty well known, not by last name but as Monday-night regulars. The guy at the first bar remembers Mike and Vinnie coming in two nights ago, must have been just after eight because he started his shift then. My guess is Sandy was already at Linda's by seven, while Vinnie didn't leave HCR with Mike until almost eight. Vinnie wanted to speak with me about something. A suspicion, maybe?"

Nobody else jumped in.

"So, the guy at the second place also remembers just Mike and Vinnie. The woman at the third bar remembers Mike, but not Vinnie. The woman at the fourth place is sure Mike ordered two drinks and paid for them. The guy at the last stop remembers only Mike mentioning Vinnie was in the men's room. Now how about that?"

Doyle said, "Any of them say I had blood on me? Huh? No. The guy who killed Vinnie'd be covered in his blood. So shove it."

I shook my head. "No, Mike. Shove it's what you did. In the alley. All that biological background, you knew that cold weather widens the brackets for time of death. You also knew where to stick the blade, what parts of the body were vital but wouldn't go off like geysers, especially given the layers of clothes Vinnie would be wearing this time of year."

Murphy said, "We checked with the Medical Examiner, Doyle. All the wounds are consistent with what Cuddy here is saying."

Fried jerked his head up. "What? What're you saying?"

Doyle said, "Shut up."

I engaged Fried. "I'm saying Vinnie preceded Mike to HCR and Mike resented that, despite or even because Vinnie helped Mike get his job here. I'm saying Vinnie was assigned some juicy new project and Mike especially resented that. And finally I'm saying that Mike stabbed Vinnie to death so he could succeed him as HCR's leading light in bio-tech consulting."

Fried showed the bewilderment of a refugee. "Mike? Mike, what's this guy trying to sell here?"

"Can it, Sandy. He can't prove a thing."

"Prove? Prove! What's with prove? You just say you didn't do it, right? Just say it, say it to me."

Doyle looked at Fried with something approaching revulsion. Fried said, "My God, Mike. Say it!"

Doyle dipped his head, chin resting on his chest. "I want a lawyer."

It took both Murphy and me to pull Fried off the third musketeer.

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The boat had already been named the Arion *when Mitch bought it. He'd intended to change it, then realized the legend would appeal to customers. Besides, the name might bring good luck in an area abundant with dolphins . . .*

FOLLOWING THE DOLPHINS

by LINDA O. JOHNSTON

My husband Mitchell disappeared because I forgot to take my Dramamine.

I could blame it on the dolphins, but they were only playing when it happened, after all, and so I have to swallow the guilt myself.

You see, I get seasick. Floor-rolling, stomach-somersaulting, ungracefully, unmercifully seasick. Not a very good position for a lady who makes her living on the sea, hugging the head half the day. The little patches you stick behind your ears to prevent *mal de mer* work—when I remember to get a prescription. Otherwise, I take pills. Usually.

The day Mitch disappeared, I awoke to the sound of him singing in the shower, accompanying the waterproof radio I gave him for his birthday. I'm not a morning person and it takes shoving me out of bed to get me up—and, like always, he'd forgotten my morning push. I scrambled out of bed and spent the rest of the time before hurtling myself out the door at his side contending with his grousing about my always being late by giving as good as I got.

Fortunately, our apartment is only a few miles from the Oxnard docks. Sammy, Frank, and Cissy were already on the boat checking out the snorkeling gear and life preservers. We were taking a group of beginners out that day.

It was a typical Southern California August day. You'd think after twenty-three years I'd get tired of it—baby-blue sky under scorching sun, whispering breeze tickling the tops of the waves—but I'm one of those birds called a *Nativus Californiansis*. A boat was my cradle, the beach my playpen. I never get tired of it.

That was why I happened to come to work for Mitch a couple of

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years back. I was finishing college—marine biology, what else? I needed a summer job, so I answered a classified ad in the Oxnard newspaper and went to work for Mitch Black the next day. I boarded his thirty-foot cruiser, the *Arion,* and left it only to sleep and get supplies, and, when fall came, to finish classes.

It was heaven. In the summer we took out diving groups, mostly to the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary off the Southern California coast. Winters, we did whale watches. There was Mitch, who was captain, and a crew of four—Frank, Sammy, Cissy, and me.

That morning, as Mitch and I scrambled on board, Cissy looked up at us from the stack of snorkels she was counting and gave us a look that reminded me she and Mitch had had a thing going before Mitch and I had connected. She'd been one of the things he and I had argued about early on—until he convinced me he'd fallen for me as hard as I had for him. After that, I wondered why she stayed on. But she was good at what she did and she and Mitch were friends. She was one argument he finally won.

Next time I saw Mitch that morning he was up on the bridge with Frank.

"Hi, Kerry," our resident beach bum welcomed me. He'd been with us for about six months, showing up for work only occasionally and always nudging Mitch to pay him more for less work. But when he did work, Frank was an undeniable asset. He charmed the ladies, and it was obvious that many of the women who signed up trip after trip found him irresistible.

Just as we were about to get started, I checked in with Sammy. Sammy was what my father would have called a harmless old coot. He worked hard for little pay, his greatest reward being "chief" of the boat. To him, Chief was a high-and-mighty title—to us, I'm afraid, he was simply chief maintenance man, chief janitor, chief drudge.

"Got a full house today," he said, a big grin hoisting the corners of his mouth and his hangdog eyes. He held a clipboard in his hand. "Fifteen divers."

"That's a lot, Sammy," Mitch said. "Did you pick up enough food?"

"I think so, Captain." He flipped the page to another list. "Three dozen rolls, two pounds of cheese, a large—"

"That's good, Sammy," Mitch said, squeezing him across his bare, bony shoulders. Like the rest of us, Sammy was in his bathing suit.

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The only difference was the captain's hat labeled CHIEF he wore on his head.

It didn't take long before we were on our way. Despite only a mild breeze, the ocean was taking a nap. That was when I remembered I'd left my Dramamine in the medicine chest at home. But I managed to make it all the way out to Santa Rosa Island without feeling the vibrations too much.

Mitch tested several favorite spots before deciding on one where the water was calm enough for beginners. We anchored near a picture-postcard cove a hundred yards offshore, after explaining that the island was private property and we hadn't permission to land. I helped Cissy demonstrate how to use the snorkeling equipment we made available to the divers and describe what they might see underwater: the giant kelp beds, bright-orange garibaldi fish, grumpy-looking rockfish, and coral. Then all of us but Sammy, who would stay on board, geared up to accompany the day-liners into the water off the back of the boat.

As I said, it was a typical day. One of the kids floated off a bit, but he was wearing his inflated life vest. "Kerry, your husband's a wonder," the distraught mother said, treading water alongside me as Mitch swam back, kidlet in tow, strong arms and muscular legs cutting swiftly through the water.

As usual, the hours we spent out at the island diving under a hot sun in the cool, clear water passed quickly. Back on board, Sammy had things under control and everyone seemed pleased with the picnic spread as we headed toward home.

As we started off, I joined Mitch on the bridge. It was the first time we'd been alone since that morning and I fit my body close to his.

Mitch was almost ten years older than I am. He entered the Navy after high school, hated the discipline, and de-enlisted as soon as his hitch was up. College was too confining, so he went to technical school and learned how to take things apart and put them together. Since he, too, loved the sea, he specialized in boat engines and did handiwork afterward, saving up enough for a down payment on the *Arion*. The rest was history—he'd been taking out tourists for much longer than I'd known him, and thrived on it.

But that day he looked worried there at the helm. I looked at him with concern. "Something wrong, honey?"

He hesitated, turning the polished oak wheel, maintaining his

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grip on the spokes. "We got a problem with one of the crew, Kerry. I think I know who it is, but see if you can figure it."

He never got a chance to tell me more.

"Dolphins!" came the cry from above. "To the starboard!" Cissy must have been sunning herself on top of the bridge cabin again instead of entertaining the paying customers.

We looked out to starboard and there they were—hundreds of them! I got on the loudspeaker, revving up my spiel from the winter trips when we took people out to find California grey whales during their migration down the coast and back. Sometimes we saw more dolphins than whales. Either way, the customers seemed delighted.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "you're in for a treat. Those beauties off to starboard are Pacific white-sided dolphins. They've spotted us—they'll be right here to play."

Sure enough, the dolphins rushed at us, arcing out of the water, displaying their white-striped sides, their slick wet backs sparkling silver in the sun. Then bunches of them began riding our bow wave. To tempt them to stay for a while, Mitch set the boat on a tight circular automatic course, then we both went downstairs to the passenger level to join the fun.

With Mitch beside me on the narrow deck area that stretched around the boat to the larger fore and aft decks, I went on with my speech, using a microphone on the outside wall of the enclosed passenger cabin.

"This boat—the *Arion*—is named after an ancient Greek who was a dolphin lover. He ought to have been. Legend has it they saved his life. He was a passenger on a boat somewhere far offshore, like all of you, when the captain and crew became envious of some of the goods he'd brought on board and threatened to throw him over. He asked for one last wish, and since it sounded innocent enough they granted it.

"He took from his luggage an ancient lyre called a cithara and played it—a high-pitched song. When he'd finished, they threw him overboard. But his song had attracted a school of dolphins and they maneuvered him safely to shore. If any of you have any gold in your bags, maybe you'd better start playing your citharas now while you've still got a chance." This brought the usual light laughter from the passengers.

The boat had already been named *Arion* when Mitch bought it. He'd intended to change it, then realized the legend would appeal

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to customers. Besides, the name might bring good luck in an area abundant with dolphins.

The small sea mammals leapt and breached at our sides, skimmed under the surface close up beneath the waves, laughing and leaping as we played their rollicking game, one they often played with willing ships. Supposedly, it saved their energy, surfing on the waves made by the boats without having to flick their tails to keep up. Whyever they enjoyed it, it was always a breathtaking sight.

The only problem that day was, as we went round and round, the motor groaning, spray shooting over the sides, our prow scudded into the waves we created for the dolphins, causing the boat to bump and buck. Normally that didn't phase me because I'd taken my Dramamine. That day I lasted about five minutes, then, hand clasped to my mouth, I dove for the head.

It seemed like hours before the bouncing stopped. Feeling only a little better, I dragged myself up the wooden stairs toward the pilot cabin. Instead of Mitch at the controls, I found Frank.

"Looking green, Kerry."

"Thanks, Frank. I needed you to tell me. Where's Mitch?"

"Wasn't he with you?" Perspiration erupted on Frank's forehead. "A lot of the passengers were beginning to get a bit peaked, so I went looking for him. When I didn't see him, I decided I'd better straighten her out and head for home. I swear, Kerry, I thought he was holding your head."

A wave of terror shot through me. "Stop the boat, Frank!" I ordered. "Now!"

I tore through the boat, looking everywhere, from the roost Cissy had vacated to the small, damp storage area below deck. There I shoved wet supply boxes and stacks of dripping face-masks, flippers, and snorkels aside. No Mitch. And no one remembered seeing him after I had. Everyone's attention had been on the dolphins.

"Turn back!" I screamed to Frank, tearing back up to the controls.

The best any of us could do was estimate where we'd spotted the dolphins, which was where Mitch must have gone over. For our excursions, state-of-the-art navigation equipment would have cost a year's profits and not have served our purposes any better than the ancient gear we had. Until that day.

We did have a radio, of course. Mostly we used it in whale season

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to share spottings with other boats. That day I called the Coast Guard.

Waiting for a search-and-rescue team, I organized our own. We circled round and round the area we thought we'd been, everyone staring over the rails, looking for any break in the sameness of the surface. I alternated between studying the water and interviewing everyone on board. There had been people hanging over every rail while the dolphins were about—how could he have gone over in plain view of nineteen pair of eyes?

The best I could figure, by the time I'd talked to them all, was that he *hadn't* gone over the rails. That left one possibility. I went back down to the storage area below. The window, used for ventilation, that was always kept locked while we were away from land to prevent supplies from getting soaked, was wide open—the floor, an inch deep in sea water, muddied with gunk. It was a large enough opening for a man to have gotten through. Chest high on Mitch, though, it would have been hard for him to have lost his balance and fallen through.

By the time the Coast Guard arrived, Mitch had been missing for at least an hour. Because it was summer, daylight would last a while longer, so we worked alongside the search-and-rescue team until dark, finally crawling our way back to shore without a clue as to what had happened to Mitch.

Cissy cried a lot, as did several women passengers. My eyes remained dry, although I couldn't stop shaking. "Mitch is a strong swimmer," I comforted them—and myself. "And we weren't that far from a couple of the islands. We'll find him tomorrow."

By myself in bed that night for the first time in more than two years, I cried. I was scared, and horribly alone. Mitch was all alone, too, someplace out in the blackness of the Pacific night. We had to find him tomorrow.

Then the guilt struck as I realized that if I'd remembered my pills I'd have been at Mitch's side until he'd gone back up to resume the controls. Hugging his pillow, I replayed our final conversation over and over—his hint that we had some trouble with a member of the crew.

I thought about how he could have gone overboard with no one seeing. The storeroom window wasn't far above the surface of the water—he wouldn't have made much of a splash, especially with all the noise over the dolphins. And the window was toward the

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aft—most people would have been staring forward. But it was set high and would be hard to fall from. Was it possible someone had pushed him? But who? None of the passengers would have reason. Mitch had said we had a problem with a member of the crew. Could that problem have been bad enough for the crew member to try to kill him? If so, which one?

Cissy, maybe? She might resent me, but her continuing friendship with Mitch had always struck me as all too genuine.

Not Sammy, certainly. He loved Mitch for giving him a job, putting him "in charge." On the way back to shore that day he'd looked at me, tears running down his cheeks, his infernal clipboard in his hands. "The Captain always goes over my orders for the next day on the way home," he'd said. "I guess you're captain now." And he'd held out the board to me.

To humor him, I'd taken it, thumbed through the nearly illegible lists and ledger pages, then handed it back. "We're going to cancel everything for tomorrow, anyhow, Sammy. When we've got the captain back, you'll get your orders." He broke down and I had to get away from him. I couldn't imagine him harming Mitch for the world.

Frank, then? The worst I could think about him was that he was pushing for money again. And it was curious that he had taken it on himself to head for shore without first checking with Mitch or me.

Then a horrible thought struck me. Could he have done that to hide what he'd done to Mitch?

There was no sign of Mitch the next day. The Coast Guard team couldn't have been nicer, shifting me from helicopter to patrol boat and back again every time I had a whim. We skimmed the sea and the island shores. At the end of the day, the uniformed man in charge took me aside. "Mrs. Black, I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid we've done all we can."

I'd been brave in my hope all day, but at his words I went limp. "Then you won't be doing anything tomorrow?"

He shook his head.

It was up to me, then. Mitch would be counting on me. I went home to our empty apartment and sat at the kitchen table until I felt in control, then I called the crew and told them to meet me at the boat at nine in the morning.

As we left the shore behind, Frank at the helm, I talked to them

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all up on the bridge. "Look," I said, "you've all been with Mitch a while. I've got an idea what happened to him and I want you to help me check it out."

They all three stared at me, and I hurried on. "It may seem silly and superstitious, but I don't think this boat was named the *Arion* for nothing."

"You don't mean—" Cissy began.

I said, "I know—the story of Arion is a legend, but legends have been known to have a basis in fact. Even in modern times, dolphins have rescued people. They've led sailors lost in storms toward shore. Dolphins have fought off sharks to save a swimmer. I've even read of dolphins leading boats through hazardous areas to keep them from piling up on the rocks."

Sammy's eyes were wide. "Do you think them dolphins we were playing with could have saved the captain?"

"I'm hoping that, Sammy. I want to find the dolphins first, then follow them. Maybe they'll lead us to Mitch."

We'd been cruising the Channel Islands area for three hours before we spotted them. It was a huge pod of Pacific white-sided dolphins, and they headed our way.

As they reached us, Frank began to circle them as we had two days before, only much slower, our path much wider. The dolphins once more began their joyous fandango at the bow and on either side. "Okay, now," I told Frank, "in a few minutes I want you to shut down so that they'll head away. Then we'll follow them—and hope they'll lead us to Mitch."

The dolphins certainly acted as though they had something to tell us. They headed southwest when we no longer made waves for them to frolic in, but kept circling back toward the boat as if asking us to follow. Their strange antics allowed us to keep up with them even though they'd the capacity to leave us far behind.

I'd taken the wheel by then. Excitement on the ship was growing. Cissy kept popping up to the bridge. "They're really acting weird," she said.

Frank stayed beside me, as though he didn't trust me to handle the boat without grounding us even though I'd taken control plenty of times before.

Sammy stood like a statue at the farthest point of the bow, staring at the dolphins, his small shoulders hunched beneath his tight, grubby T-shirt. I couldn't see his face from where I was.

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"That must be it!" I finally called. We weren't far off the shore of Santa Cruz Island and the dolphins were swimming away as though, mission accomplished, they'd lost interest. I headed the boat toward a small rocky beach and dropped anchor. "I know we haven't permission of the owners to land here," I told the others, "but surely they'll let us stay long enough to look for Mitch."

Then all four of us dressed down and dove off the stern. It took us only a few minutes to reach the beach.

Mitch was nowhere. But what was there, far up on the beach where the tide wouldn't reach, was a bundle of eucalyptus leaves, apparently gathered from the ground beneath the trees surrounding the beach, crowned by a crumpled yellow shirt I recognized as Mitch's. "It looks like the shirt he was wearing when he disappeared! He must have used it for a pillow when he slept here!"

"It could be anyone's, Kerry," Frank said dubiously.

"Hey, look at this!" Cissy called over to us from where she stood farther down the beach, pointing at the sand.

The three of us hurried toward her. There, etched into the narrow spit of sand, was the word "Arion."

"Oh, thank God!" I cried. "Who else but Mitch would have written that?"

Frank grinned. "Yeah! Hey, Kerry, you were right—old Mitchell's still alive!" He looked pleased, relieved.

I turned toward Cissy. Tears were streaming down her face. Her eyes were wide and happy, as though she'd witnessed a miracle. "He must be somewhere on the island," she whispered.

When I looked for Sammy, I saw he'd gone back toward where we'd spotted the yellow shirt. Then it was in his hands, and, like Cissy, he was crying.

But when I went to him his expression was anything but joyful. "It was an accident," he sobbed. "Y'see, my landlord raised the rent. Me, I know there's not much money to spare from our trips, and you and the captain had been good to me, but I still asked him for a little more and he said he'd try, but he couldn't, not yet. Meantime, my landlord was about to kick me out. So I took some stuff—a little of the lunch money, you know, and some of the diving gear to sell. He noticed there should have been more supplies downstairs than there was and I saw that. Day before yesterday when you were all watching them dolphins, he come down to the storeroom to look for me."

Sammy retreated a few steps as Frank, Cissy, and I advanced

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toward him. "Now you stay away," he said. "I just want you to know before the captain tells you himself. Anyhow, I started with a story as to how I'd taken some things to repair them, like that. But he didn't believe me. 'Sammy,' he says, 'tell me the truth.'

"I couldn't. Not the captain. I was so ashamed, I just jumped up onto the table, the one just beside the window, and looked out. It would have been so easy just to jump, but in a second he was up there beside me. I tried to push him away, and then— It should have been me, Miz Black," he wailed. "It should have been me!"

Old Sammy, with his short thin legs, shouldn't have been as fast as he was, but he was into the trees behind the beach in no time. We chased him up through the hills until we lost him altogether.

"We'd better get back to the boat," I told the others. "Radio the Coast Guard, Cissy, and tell them to get someone out here to pick Sammy up. Tell them it sounds like it was an accident but they should investigate."

"What about Mitch?" Cissy asked. "He's probably here, too!"

I smiled faintly at her, my eyes moist. "No," I told her, "he's not."

"How do you know?" Cissy accused.

"Yes, how?" Frank said. "I mean, after all, we really were following those dolphins. *You* could fool us, sure, if you wanted, but how could you get them to cooperate? And the stuff on the beach—"

"The stuff on the beach was the easiest. I laid the trap yesterday when I was looking for Mitch with the Coast Guard. They didn't think I'd get anywhere with my plan, but helped me carry it out."

"But the dolphins," Frank insisted, "how did you get them to lead us here?"

"Well, I couldn't be sure of them," I admitted. "I wasn't sure we'd even find them, first of all, and if we did whether they'd behave the way I hoped."

Frank's eternal sneer had returned, deepened with impatience.

"Look," I said, "we were sort of leading, not following. The dolphins' most important sense is hearing, which is why they responded to Arion's cithara. For his last birthday, I bought Mitch a waterproof radio he could hang on the tile of the shower stall. I took it down this morning and attached it to the keel of the boat before any of you arrived. I rigged it with a small wire all the way up to the bridge so I could turn it on and off. The hardest part was running it so none of you would trip over it and start asking questions. I turned it on when we spotted the dolphins, let it play a while, then shut it off. Whenever they started to swim away, I turned it back on so they'd

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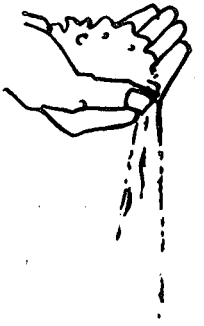
come back. It looked as if they were coming back to get us to follow, but what they were really doing was returning for the music."

Both Cissy and Frank sat in silent awe while we waited for the Coast Guard to arrive. They had radioed people on the island to watch out for Sammy. I didn't think he was dangerous to anyone but himself, but I hoped they'd keep him away from me.

Then we were on our way back to Oxnard on the *Arion*.

And me? I've been trying to learn to live without Mitch—the bleak succession of days with no goal but survival. At first, I held out some hope, not wanting to believe Mitch was gone. But deep inside I knew that naming a boat after the enchantment of Arion doesn't place its crew under the dolphins' protection.

I'll always wonder how dolphins decide who to save. And why it couldn't have been Mitch. Who can understand them at all? They certainly don't always come to music, cithara or not. But they did that once, and for that I have to be grateful.



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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

In August of last year, we received a manuscript from Peter Lovesey with the following explanation:

"The enclosed story is not one of mine. It comes from a writer whose name you are unlikely to know: Glyn Hardwicke. Over twenty years ago, the late Stanley Ellin was on a trip to England and called in at one of the regular meetings of the Crime Writers Association. Glyn was a member on the strength of a history he had written of the Port of London Authority Police. In his legal career he was Prosecuting Solicitor of the Port of London Authority. His great interest outside the law was wine, and he became an international authority.

"Having joined the Crime Writers, he had a secret ambition to write a piece of fiction, and he had an idea for a short story that Stan Ellin coaxed from him that evening. It involved the extraordinary properties of Essencia, the rarest drink in the world. Stanley Ellin liked the idea enough to speak to Glyn about Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine *and your Department of First Stories.*

"Glyn was deeply touched by the great man's kindness to a would-be short-story writer. It took some years—and several drafts—before he found the confidence to write the story and show it to me for an opinion. That was early this summer. I made a few small suggestions, and the enclosed is the result.

"Three weeks after completing the only short story he ever wrote, Glyn suffered a stroke and died. He was sixty-eight, and had been the most active and popular member of the CWA Committee. I asked his widow Betty if he had sent the story to EQMM, *but he had not."*

And so Mr. Lovesey became the go-between on Mr. Hardwicke's behalf, and ours. You will agree, we're sure, that "The Elixir" is an extraordinary first—and, lamentably, last—well worthy of Stanley Ellin's encouragement and Peter Lovesey's care. (In speaking of Stanley Ellin—whose "Specialty of the House," it is widely agreed, is the most memorable in the long history of our Department of First Stories—Peter Lovesey refers to the "great man's kindness." Everyone who knew Stanley Ellin felt that great-

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ness and that kindness. We would like to add that those fortunate enough to know Peter Lovesey are soon aware of the same rare qualities in him.)

"The Elixir" came with the following dedication by Mr. Hardwicke: "If it is in order for a short story to be dedicated, then, remembering a magic evening during which a great gentleman and master of the genre was so courteous and kind to me, I should like to dedicate this one to the memory of Stanley Ellin . . ."

THE ELIXIR

by GLYN HARDWICKE

There we sat, Henry Tremayne and I, one on each side of my brother's bed, watching him die.

It was a curious situation, made more curious by the extraordinary environment in which my brother had chosen to live. A great, insensitive bullock of a man, he had for some inexplicable reason settled on a Victorian winter as the setting he most enjoyed. And it was really quite difficult to believe, as he lay in his final coma, that in the world outside the bedroom which the heavy curtains totally excluded, it was a sunny afternoon in the summer of 1973.

The walls were of dark oak paneling from floor to ceiling, the curtains a plum-colored velvet which blended darkly with the deep-red thick-pile carpet. The bed on which Michael lay was a four-poster, its dark-green canopy duplicated in the bedspread. Between the curtain-shrouded floor-to-ceiling windows stood one of those ancient marble-topped washstands, bearing a large porcelain basin and jug, as if the running water in the house had not yet been installed. On the opposite wall, a heavy mahogany desk held a typewriter not merely old but antique and a number of small but heavy gilt frames, each holding an early photograph which may have had nothing at all to do with our family—they couldn't be distinguished in the near darkness of the room. The wall at the foot of the bed was dominated by a huge Victorian wardrobe five or six feet wide, which rose almost to the ceiling. The atmosphere was unpleasantly

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oppressive, and our discomfort, had he been conscious, would have added materially to the sadistic pleasure of the obese hulk whom we had been summoned to see breathing his last.

Periodically, noticing a few small beads of sweat on the dying man's brow, Tremayne leaned forward and wiped it with a napkin damped with a solution of water and *eau de cologne,* the faint perfume of which served temporarily to hide the sickly scent of approaching death.

I had always felt sorry for Tremayne, knowing how the loyalty with which he was imbued was so often in bilious conflict with the deep sensitivity which was his core. It was far easier for me, for I had trained myself for most of my life to block out, mentally and physically, the unpleasantness which had clung from childhood to the persona of my brother.

Technically, we were not brothers but half brothers. The mother we shared had been one of those frail-seeming Grecian women who constantly surprise everyone by surviving the strong ones around them. Her first husband, Michael's father, a bullying monster like his son, broke his neck in a riding accident. Her second, my father, a modest man with a fortune that was anything but modest, died of pneumonia when I was only four. Having survived both of them, the mother we shared died in her nineties as placidly as she had lived.

By then, of course, both my brother and I had long since come to England and changed our names. Mikhail Stratos, as he was born, had taken on the cloak of Michael Strathy and acquired an international reputation as a gourmet and authority on wine which he deployed with such consummate skill that very few people knew it to be quite phony. I, for my part, having started life as Claudius Paragionis, had become Claude Paragon—my adopted surname being the product not, as some may have thought, of arrogance but of enchantment, since I took it from the name of a street in the lovely Georgian city of Bath where I found a kind acceptance and eventual wealth as an antique dealer. Between us, there had always existed not mere sibling rivalry but active dislike. Michael had bullied the daylights out of me as a child. It may have been the regular beatings he inflicted on me that gave him the taste for violence he had since always enjoyed. If so, then they did him more harm than me, who they provided only with the determination to be as unlike him as I could.

Suddenly, on the giant bed, my brother moved. Ever since my

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arrival he had been inert, unresponsive to the tender ministrations of Tremayne. I had assumed this would continue until he died. But now he stirred, as if recoiling from Tremayne's perfunctory dabbing with the napkin. Doubtless it was simply the body making itself more comfortable, unconnected with any brain activity, but for a moment I thought he was about to open his eyes and return to full consciousness, looking with his old contempt upon both of us, before raking Tremayne with some unnecessarily offensive criticism. A moment of fear—a reflex conditioned by recollections of childhood—bubbled up through the years of patiently acquired insulation. I glanced across the bed and thought I saw a not dissimilar reaction cross the face of my companion.

"The doctor did say he was coming back?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, quite definitely. He's got an emergency nearby—in the next block of flats, I believe. I gather his patient there is in a high fever approaching a crisis and it's important that he should be present. But he knows Michael's state exactly. He promised to be back again before the end."

"I hope he's in time."

"He seemed quite confident. I asked him if there was anything we could do, but he said there was nothing. It's just a question of watching and waiting, I'm afraid."

"There's no chance of Michael coming out of the coma?"

"None at all. The doctor was clear. He may move very slightly, as he did just then, but it's really just the body gradually letting go—giving up."

"Something that Michael was always reluctant to do," I said with a wry smile I didn't expect to be returned—and it wasn't.

Henry Tremayne and I had been fellow pupils at Marlborough in the middle 1930s, when we had become good friends. If some form of "collective memory" had contributed to my expertise in the old languages, Tremayne was a genuine natural linguist, with an ear that could embrace not merely the vocabulary, the grammar, and the "sound" of a language but the idioms and nuances which make each tongue a living thing.

We both left school shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War and met again, to our joint pleasure, in the Intelligence Corps. My early upbringing had given good reason for the Army to keep Greece on my records and, after a spell as a general interrogator of German prisoners, I was sent to my native land, to carry out certain duties about which I do not nowadays choose to talk. But

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when I landed one dark night in a small bay in the Peloponnese, it was a relief and a delight to be greeted by Henry Tremayne, and we were together, on and off, throughout the rest of the war.

Back in England in peacetime, Henry learned of my relationship to Michael and sought an introduction. Naturally, I was at a loss to understand why one so worthwhile should be anxious to make the acquaintance of someone who seemed to me to be diametrically opposite in character to himself. On the other hand, Henry was a friend I had come to value most highly—indeed, he had twice literally saved my life—and I didn't hesitate. What my coarse brother had ever done to attract the adulation of as gentle a soul as Tremayne I never knew, but I felt that even so insensitive a brute as Michael could not fail eventually to respond to such genuine appreciation.

Michael was by this time famous as a *bon vivant,* and I equipped Tremayne with a letter of introduction and followed it up with a phone call to Michael—which, as usual, turned my stomach. Some months later, I was pleased to receive a warm letter from Tremayne saying that he had become my brother's amanuensis and personal assistant. What Michael paid him I have no idea, but he could certainly afford to be generous. I saw Tremayne only occasionally, but gathered he was content in the position.

Then one weekend he contacted me, saying he had some kind of mission in the west country and suggesting it could be combined with a reunion. He arrived in Bath, I remember, on a Friday evening. After dinner in my flat, he told me his visit concerned a very rare item in the gastronomic world. Naturally I was curious, but rather than enlarge on the topic he seemed politely secretive and I didn't press him. We spent a quiet but happy evening reminiscing about adventures shared during the war, and I put him up for the night.

He was off in a hired car early the next morning and I didn't see him again for some years. Then I had a letter from him, warning me that Michael had suffered a kidney failure and was not expected to last more than a day or two. The letter seemed unusually formal—I forget exactly what he said, but in its mood it was not unlike that celebrated bulletin posted on the railings of Buckingham Palace in January 1936 about the dying George V: "The King's life is ebbing peacefully towards its close." Apparently Michael had evinced a strong desire that I should be present at the end and, despite misgivings, I felt obligated. Which is how Henry and I came to be sitting on either side of Michael's bed watching him die.

Now I noticed that Michael's breathing had started to become

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shallower. I looked across at Tremayne, wondering what, if anything, we should do and at that moment the doorbell rang and he went quickly to answer it, bringing the doctor—a bright young man named Lister—back with him, stethoscope already in hand. With a nod to me, he listened to Michael's chest and then said quietly, "It's a matter of minutes, I'm afraid. He's in a coma, you understand. He has no idea what's happening to him. I'll stay until he's gone, and then I must dash off again, if you'll excuse me."

So the moment was approaching. I got up out of my chair—I really don't know why, but it seemed the right thing to do. Tremayne did the same on his side of the bed. And as we stood there, Michael again stirred slightly, as if to make himself more comfortable, and there was a little sound, something like a tiny gurgle, in his throat. The doctor stepped forward and again listened with his stethoscope. Then he smiled sadly and said, "That's it, I'm afraid."

Tremayne stood motionless for a moment, his head bowed, and I did more or less the same. Michael's face looked very peaceful—and, for the first time in my recollection, quite gentle. There was actually a suggestion of a smile on his face. The doctor covered him with the sheet and then left us, saying he'd return as soon as he could to complete the death certificate and so forth. Henry showed him to the door and came back. And then a number of things happened.

Henry suddenly took a deep breath and reached out, flicked the sheet back from the dead man's face, and stood looking down at him for a few seconds. A look of intense distaste came over his face.

"Ah, well—that's that, then, Claude." He looked up and stared at me in a strange way. "Or is it?" he added.

"What do you mean, Henry?"

"Have you wondered why Michael should have been so anxious that you should be here with me to watch him die?" he said with a quizzical smile.

"Not really. I just assumed that a dying man might prefer to be with his friends and family rather than alone."

"Oh, there was a better reason than that, Claude. A very good reason. You are to be a witness."

"A witness to what?"

Again that curious smile. "You heard the doctor pronounce him dead, didn't you?"

I nodded. Tremayne bent down beside the bed and came back up holding a briefcase which must have been at his feet. From it with

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care he took a little half-liter bottle with a sherry-type cork in it. This he placed carefully on the bedside table.

"Know what's in that, Claude?" he smiled.

I shook my head, quite mystified.

"It is just a drop—a little drop—of something so rare and precious that few people have ever seen it, let alone tasted it."

I sank into my chair, my eyes on my friend's face. Then something flickered in the back of my memory. "Is it a wine? Or possibly a liqueur?"

"It is neither, Claude."

"Some form of non-alcoholic tisane?"

"No, it's alcoholic, all right, though only about fourteen percent, which is less than sherry and very little more than many table wines. It has been described as the attar—the very quintessence—of the grape. It's the legendary Tokaji Aszu Essencia. The description of it I like best is that coined, or perhaps stolen, by Michael himself—'To drink it is as if one were penetrating gradually into the heart of the grape, discovering the true nectar that men have always believed lay there.' It has even been proclaimed as the elixir of life itself."

"I *have* heard of it," I said. "It comes from Hungary, doesn't it?"

"It does, yes. From the hills of northeastern Hungary. In a sense, it's a unique extension of that country's rarest and greatest wine, the celebrated Tokaji Aszu, which is an unfortified wine made from individually picked grapes suffering from what the French call *pourriture noble*. Essencia itself dates back to 1650. It's probably the rarest drink in the world. Even Aszu is made only in exceptional years when the summer has been perfect. And compared to Essencia, Aszu is almost common."

"It's coming back to me now," I told him. "Isn't this the liquid for which the grapes are never pressed—they're just allowed to bleed under their own weight?"

"Exactly. Little drips from those shriveled, rotted grapes are collected in stone jars. When there is no more to drip, what remains of the grapes is reduced to a mash of pulp, skin, and pips, which is mixed with an exceptional Szamorodni wine. What results is identified by the number of hodfuls which are added. Then they're taken in casks down into the cellars, where they go through a series of fermentations over the next six or seven years. Eventually the liquid clarifies itself and is allowed to mature in partly filled casks with loosely fitting bungs. A thick layer of blue-black fungus forms every-

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where during this process, and this feeds on the bacteria in the wine and helps to mature it further."

"And what you get is Essencia, is it?" I asked.

"Oh, no, my dear Claude—all this is to achieve the great Tokaji Aszu. Essencia is a whole stage beyond that again. Essencia can be made only when there is enough Aszu wine of the highest quality—and even then it sometimes doesn't take, and the whole production is lost. The last year in which any was made was in 1964. The last before that was in 1934 and it may be decades before the conditions allow more. Some people think they can deduce how it's made, but it has never been explained fully and there are parts of the process which remain a complete mystery."

"And yet here is some in England, of all places."

He eyed me steadily. "This is the last known drop of the legendary 1934. It is said to be the longest-lived drink in the world—quite unaffected by oxidation, for some mysterious reason. And that is only part of the magical properties attributed to it. Only one English firm has ever been allowed by the Hungarian government to import any—Berry Brothers and Rudd, of St. James's. Last autumn, they obtained a small consignment of the 1964, the first Essencia for thirty years. It was offered to a handful of their most favored customers."

"And you were among them?"

"No. Do you remember the evening a few years ago when I came and spent a night with you in Bath?"

I nodded. "Vividly. You said something about a special mission and I didn't like to ask what it was."

"I knew you weren't the type to question an old friend about something he didn't want to talk about. Well, I had heard—purely by chance—that there was an old man in the country not far from Bath who was understood to own a bottle of the 1934."

"Good Lord."

"I tracked him down and called there. Of course, so few people know anything about Essencia that it's often not recognized what it might be worth. Nor is that the only mystery about it. Its effects, too, are legendary, you know."

"Yes. Didn't someone administer it to a very elderly aunt who was fading away and it revived her completely?"

"Oh, that's a very well authenticated incident. But it's not unique, by any means. At one time, Berrys kept a list with details of dozens of documented cases where their customers had effected cures by

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means of Essencia varying from the dramatic to the sensational. Essencia has been described more than once as the elixir of life itself."

"And you bought this bottle?"

He nodded.

"You were on a mission for Michael?"

"It rather depends on what you mean by that. If you mean that Michael had sent me, no. He had no idea that the old man existed. But it was for Michael in the sense that I intended to give it to him on his seventieth birthday, last March."

"It was a present for him about which he knew nothing, you mean?"

"Just so."

"What a gift! I hope he appreciated it!"

He sighed and glanced toward the corpse.

"Well, you know how completely I admired your brother, Claude—how I had done for many years. It was thanks to you that I was able to meet him in the first place. He had been my ultimate hero ever since boyhood."

"To be candid, Henry, I've never been able to understand why."

"I know. You regarded me as a reasonably sensitive soul, and Michael as the reverse. Basically, you were right. Over the years I spent with him, there were many occasions on which he not only treated me like dirt—he enjoyed doing so. It was as if he was so sure nothing would shake my admiration for him that he wanted to see to what lengths he could go. The strange thing was, however, that his repeated insults became for me a constant challenge. I guess it was sheer obstinacy—I was determined that nothing he could do would break my willingness to stick with him. Not that he was always like that, of course. There were times when he was so kind I could have wept. But they became fewer and further between. Eventually something had to bring this absurd situation to a head. And it was the Essencia."

"You gave it to him? On his birthday?"

"I did. At first he had no idea what it was. I explained how I had got hold of it. For several minutes he sat staring at the little bottle. And then he looked at me. The gratitude he could not escape feeling was slowly replaced by the realization that this was the ultimate test of how far I would go without breaking. He just said, 'Bring a glass, Henry.' I went over to the sideboard, collected two ordinary goblets, and put them on the table in front of him.

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"He opened the bottle and poured some into one of the glasses. Slowly he picked it up, held it to the light, then nosed it. He was almost trembling with excitement. He had told me more than once that this was about the only gastronomic experience he had never undergone. And then he drank it. Not sipped it—drank it. A wineglass full. And then he picked up the bottle and poured himself another. And then a third. I simply stood at the other end of the dining table, watching him.

"He never took his eyes off me. Glass by glass, he sat there drinking. And then he held up the bottle to the light and said, 'There's just a little drop left, Henry. We'll cork that up very tightly. We shall keep it until the time comes for me to die. And when I have been pronounced dead, and not before, you will pour that last little drop into my mouth. And then we shall see whether Essencia is all they say about it—whether it really is the elixir of life."

I shook my head and regarded the face of my dead brother. The smile on his lips seemed more cynical now.

"And he never gave you so much as a taste of it?"

"Not a sniff. Mind—I think that before the end I had determined that if he had poured some for me I would have thrown it in his face. For I *had* cracked, Claude. My devotion had turned suddenly and at last to hatred. But I knew I must not show it. Somehow I had to convince him that he had failed yet again to make me hate him—failed even with what he thought was the ultimate weapon. If he never knew I had lost, he would think I had won. And he never did know. He never knew that he had taken his sadistic pitcher once too often to the well of my toleration."

There was an interval of silence.

"And what are you going to do now, Henry?"

"I'm going to carry out his last wishes, Claude. In your presence—just as he directed me. Watch carefully now."

From the small table beside the bed, he took a spoon and, opening the bottle, he poured the Essencia from the bottle into it. Then he put the bottle down and opened Michael's lips. Slowly he poured the liquid, drop by drop, onto his front teeth. After a moment or two, it filtered into Michael's mouth. Henry waited until it had all gone and turned to me and laughed. A vicious, cruel laugh. And then from his waistcoat pocket he took a little fob watch and looked at it. "Ten minutes. That'll teach him!"

"Teach him what, Henry?"

"You see, my dear Claude—I have carried out Michael's wish to

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the letter. But he neglected to tell me to do it within the first four minutes after clinical death."

"Why have you told me all this?" asked Charles Stratton.

"My dear Charles," I answered, "you're not only my solicitor, you're a true friend. Besides, it's troubled me far too long. I simply had to get it off my chest."

Stratton thought for a moment. Then he smiled. "Well, the problem is nothing like as serious as you seem to imagine, Claude. Tremayne is in the clear."

"In the clear?"

"Yes. It isn't murder to refrain from trying to revive someone who has been pronounced medically dead by a qualified doctor."

I understood what he was saying, but I was rendered speechless by it. Twice I tried to speak but stopped before a single comprehensible word emerged. The third time, I found my voice.

"But—the Essencia."

"If your brother Michael had come back to life, you mean? Again—legally, no problem. Even the best of doctors make occasional honest mistakes. There are many authenticated cases of people who have been pronounced dead waking up on the mortuary slab, being revived, and walking around quite normally today. All that would have happened is that the death certificate would have been cancelled—withdrawn—as if it had never been made out."

Suddenly, passionately, I regained my fluency. "But don't you see, Charles? Tremayne meant him to come back as a vegetable! That was going to be his revenge for how my brother had treated him over all those years!"

"Oh, I see that, of course," said Stratton in his measured way. "But the law on murder is concerned with the continuance of life, not the quality of it. If your little miracle had in fact happened, Tremayne would still not have been guilty of any criminal offense, I assure you."

For a long time I sat staring blankly at my solicitor and friend. Finally I said in a tone that conveyed my anguish, "You've misunderstood me, my dear Charles. I have never been in the slightest concerned with Tremayne's legal guilt or innocence. But you have just convicted me of murder."

He stared at me. "You, Claude? Murder? But how?"

"By suffocation. On that dreadful afternoon, after Tremayne administered the elixir and told me the nature of his revenge, I was

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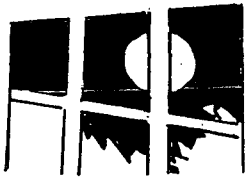
appalled. Before Tremayne could stop me, I jumped forward and lay across Michael's face. It was all over in a second or two. I murdered my brother!"

"But he was already dead, man!"

"Dead, you say? Can you imagine what a creature—alive but without a brain—is like? Charles, I felt him shudder underneath me. I simply couldn't let it go on!"

For a long moment there was complete silence in the room. And then Stratton's hand went to his mouth.

"Oh, God! Claude—you don't mean—it worked?"



DETECTIVERSE

HIS SONG

by R. C. SHEBELSKI

His skill as a robber
Defied normal belief—
When he walked in a room,
They played "Hail to the Thief."

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George's bank provided the financial backing for most of the development where they lived, and Marge was quite sure that if she'd ever offered her environmental insights she'd have been verbally *flattened.*

A new offering from a new author with a special gift for conveying the lunacy out there . . .

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF MONEY

by PATRICIA DEROZIER

Molly stalked a butterfly through the tall grass at the edge of our property. She's a ten-year-old Irish setter, but I don't have the heart to tell her that. If she wants to believe she's a four-year-old kid, that's okay with me. I firmly believe that the only reason I can no longer fit into a size ten is because most clothes are imported from the Orient nowadays. I don't mess with Molly's delusions and she doesn't mess with mine.

"You can't let her run wild like that, Marge." George had a hose trained on a scrawny blue spruce, a glare on Molly.

We live in one of those new subdivisions where logic played no part in the planning. Acres and acres of beautiful woods were cut down and the land bulldozed flat so that contractors could plop down houses. Now all the earnest young homeowners in our neighborhood spend huge sums of money and untold numbers of hours trying to get anemic saplings to take root. Our kids are the real losers. It's hard to hang a tire swing from a two-foot tree.

George's bank provided the financial backing for most of this development, and I'm quite sure that if I'd ever offered my environmental insights I'd have been *verbally* flattened. George felt a high degree of loyalty to his employer.

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"Run wild like what, George? She's just playing."

"Listen to me. There's a big problem with packs of dogs running through the woods out here. You know that. Every one of those dogs used to be someone's loving pet, but all they need is one kill and, *pow*, your domestic darling is nothing more than another member of a snarling wolfpack. That's all it takes, Marge. Just once and that animal is never the same again."

The butterfly had turned and fluttered toward Molly. Faced with such a bold assault, my killer dog bolted and ran for the safety of my side.

"What's the matter, babe? Did that butterfly try to hurt you?" I buried my fingers in her coat and scratched hard. "Come on, Molly. Chain time, old girl. Mommy's going shopping."

"Why do you have to go to K-Mart right this minute?"

"I need some stuff, George, and I want to get it out of the way this afternoon."

I wished I could have been honest with him. I'd rather have said, "Look, when *you* need some time away, you go to the racquet club. When I need some time to myself, I go to K-Mart. Membership dues are cheaper and they have branches all over the world."

Honest, yes. Good idea, no.

"I'll be back in just a little bit." I hate myself when that whiny tone starts to creep into my voice.

"Don't be gone too long. I have things to do this afternoon and my day is going to be shot if I have to take care of the kids."

"I'll be quick, I swear." I almost made it to the door of the garage.

"Marge?" I stopped, hand poised over the doorknob. "Don't take the Audi."

"Why not? The Maverick isn't running very well again."

"Use your head. You know what a zoo that parking lot is on Saturdays. I don't need some loony dinging up the door or scratching the paint job with a shopping cart. Take the Maverick."

I swallowed a big sigh. "Fine."

"Really, I meant what I said. Don't doodle away your afternoon."

I parked the Maverick near the middle of the lot, walked to the liquor store that was part of the K-Mart complex, and bought a pack of cigarettes. Back in the car, I let my mind drift, floating through soap operas and Donahue interviews. Whenever I found myself sliding too close to reality, I thought about all the headlines I'd ever seen on the cover of the *National Enquirer*.

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I finished the cigarette, flipped the butt out the window, and reached for my car keys. Maybe I'll just drive around a little, I thought, take the long way home. I turned the key and nothing happened. Once, twice—

After a dozen times, I quit. "Damn you, George Taylor! Damn your beady eyes, you selfish jerk! Why do you always get the good car and I always have to drive the wreck?"

I could hear his voice as clearly as though I'd punched a play-back button in my mind. "Don't get so worked up, Marge. Open the hood and jiggle the battery cables a little. If that doesn't work, whack the posts a couple of times with something heavy like a wrench."

I pounded the steering wheel with my fists instead. "Oh, George, you're such a jerk!" The steering wheel said nothing in George's defense.

"Fine. Just fine. I'm going to sit here and smoke, and when I'm good and ready I'll take a whack at the engine."

This is wonderful, I thought. I've reached the point in my life where I'm sitting in the parking lot at K-Mart, talking to invisible people.

My life? What life? I have no life. I am Marge. I am a marginal character. Yes, that's it—I'm a margin. I'm the white space on the sides of the page. A million stories going on right next to me and I'm just blank.

George is a jerk. Be honest with yourself: you married a self-centered, egotistical, unimaginative, insensitive jerk. You should leave him.

I toyed with the thought the way a tongue plays with a bad tooth.

Good, Marge! Great plan. What are you going to do with two little kids and an expired teaching license? Spell all the words right on your welfare application?

Maybe I'll run away. Just me. I'll live in a yellow Maverick in the parking lot at K-Mart. I'll line up some geraniums along the front bumper to give the place a homey touch, and when the kids come to visit me on weekends we can hang around the kiddy rides at the entrance to the store.

Calm down, Marge. Get a grip. Deep breaths, deep breaths.

I lit a cigarette and slid down in the seat.

One minute I was alone, wrapped in a cloud of nicotine and dark thoughts, and then the door on the passenger side cranked open

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with a loud protest and slammed shut, scattering aimless smoke throughout the car.

"Okay, lady—move it! I'll tell you where, but move it—now!"

He was relatively young, maybe nineteen, with limp blond too-long hair that fell onto his pale-blue eyes. I had an overall impression of denim and leather, ingrained dirt, and fingernails chewed to the quicks. And a gun.

"Are you crazy?" Oh, Marge, I thought. Dumb move. Real dumb move. If he is crazy, he's probably a little sensitive about it.

"Come on, lady. I ain't fooling around. Move this car or you're dead." He twitched his head to clear the hair from his eyes.

"What are you talking about?" This isn't fair, I thought. If he shoots me, I won't be a margin any more. I'll just be a footnote. This is all your fault, George—I'm going to die because you were worried about your paint job.

The boy looked as though he should be taken to a vet and wormed. He was skinny and pale, with skinny fingers and bad skin and hair in his eyes, and his skinny foot in a worn leather harness boot was tapping erratically on the floor of the car, churning up old wrappers from Hardee's. The leather jacket was old and cracked along crease lines at the insides of the elbows. It was studded everywhere—the collar, the cuffs, down the sleeves, around the edges. Dozens and dozens of silver-colored studs, some circular, some star-shaped, marched up sleeves and milled around like tiny metal creatures waiting for a bus. I was being held captive by the Tin Man's illegitimate son.

"What's with you, lady? Get moving now or you're gonna be sorry."

I spoke slowly and carefully, as though explaining something to a very small child. "I am sitting here because it is the one place I can be alone for fifteen minutes, so you can take your pop gun and whistle up a rope for all I care, but I am not moving."

It wasn't just his foot that was bouncing now. His whole right leg was jerking spasmodically, and tight, strangled noises were coming out of his throat. He looked like Molly in the throes of a nightmare. *"Move!"*

"Read my lips, you stupid cliche. *No.* You want to move? Then get out, open the hood on this car, and bang that hunk of heavy metal up against the battery posts a few times. Then maybe, just maybe, if we're lucky, this lemon-colored nightmare might decide to turn over. Until then, we're going nowhere!"

I was angry and I was scared and I was spitting on him while I

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talked and I didn't care. I slammed my head back against the headrest and stared up at the frayed ceiling of the car. "I'm overweight, overtired, and fed-up, and if you think you're going to jump in my car and wave a gun at me and tell me what to do, you have another think coming." I swung around to stare at him. "You want to make demands on my time, Ace? Take a number and get in line."

I don't know. Maybe I lost him back when I used a big word like "cliche." Maybe it had never occurred to him that his master plan would encounter any resistance. He just sat there with such a vacant look on his face that I wanted to hang an Out of Order sign on his bony nose.

"Get out! Just get out!" I gave him two quick shoves to jump-start his brain. He bobbled the gun, made a clumsy grab for it, and I shoved him again. There was a sharp-edged explosion.

He never really lost that "nobody's home" look he'd been wearing, but the grubby white T-shirt under his jacket was growing a bright-red stain.

The windows on either side of the Maverick filled with large policemen carrying very large guns. I stared straight ahead, unable to move, even when my seatmate slumped sideways, his head coming to rest on my shoulder.

George was sitting in the bathtub, eyes closed, a glass of white wine resting on the edge of the tub. The portable tape deck was plugged in on the counter, with George Winston quietly working his piano from Winter into Spring. I flipped the padded toilet seat down and sat on it.

"Long day, huh?" I said.

He never opened his eyes. "Oh, just your normal Saturday. A little yard work, lots of police, television cameras. I'm sure that lawyer is going to cost me plenty. Three calls from Henderson at the bank. 'Say, Taylor, is it true your wife was involved in a liquor-store holdup and shootout?' He'll use this against me, you can mark my words. I suppose I can count myself lucky it was a liquor store and not one of our branch banks."

I stared at a cobweb looping across a corner of the bathroom ceiling. Boy, go out on one little crime spree and the place goes to hell in a handbasket.

"Well, I can't compete with that. All I did was blow a hole in Conan the Barbiturate and then spend the rest of the afternoon

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playing Twenty Questions with Andy and Barney and the rest of the guys."

His eyes snapped open. "Put the smart tongue away, Marge. I'm entitled to a few answers. No police, now. No TV crews. It's just the two of us and you owe me some straight answers."

"Like?"

"Like, who was this guy, really? Just why did he choose you out of all the people at K-Mart? Why did that long-haired hippie decide to jump in the car with *you?*"

"A hippie? Did you really say hippie, George? A 'loser' maybe, or a 'sleazy little slimeball from hell,' that might work, but hippie? How about beatnik? Maybe you can tell your friends I was accosted by a beatnik at K-Mart."

"What am I supposed to think? You were in a car with some freak in a leather jacket. You had guns and stolen money—God knows what was going on there before the police broke up your little party."

I was silent.

"That is my car, Marge. My name is on the title of that car. My bank—the bank that pays my salary and our food bills and allows you the luxury of staying home—that bank is part owner of the car with me. Now, we—the bank and I—demand to know what we should think."

I looked at him, refusing to see through wife eyes, and studied him the way I'd study a stranger. His ears flared more than a little, though he hid them well under the styled hairdo. He had one eyebrow, a thick Magic Marker production that thinned only slightly above the bridge of his nose. The nose itself swung up at the tip into a Nixonesque ski jump. George's left pupil, which tended to float a little when he was upset, was drifting dangerously close to the bridge of his nose. I stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"Maybe it would just be best if I pack some things and go away for a while. The kids will be fine at my mother's."

"Listen to me, Marge Taylor. What happened this afternoon is bad enough, but you're not going to put my career in further jeopardy by walking out on me. You and I both know that no man with marriage problems has ever made vice-president in this organization."

I stared at him. His cheeks were bright-red and his eyes and mouth were pulled into hard circles. Pterodactyl-sized butterflies were thrashing around in my stomach. Who was this man?

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Molly nosed open the door and ambled in, tail wagging, tongue flapping, and a big setter grin on her face, ignoring George as she made her way to me. Her tail slapped the wine glass balanced on the edge of the tub and it crashed to the tile floor.

"That was a Waterford! Get that damn dog out of here before I kill her!" George grabbed the wet loofa mitt and slapped Molly across the muzzle. She yelped and back-pedaled for the door, nails clicking frantically on the tiles. She lost her footing, went down on her side, and as she pulled herself up George slapped at her again with the mitt, spraying water across the room.

I looked around for something to stop him with. A toothbrush? A box of tissues? I grabbed the tape player and held it out in front of me.

"Stop it, George!" I don't know where I found that voice. I hadn't used it since I'd single-handedly quelled a kickball riot my second year of teaching. It worked. He stopped, dripping mitt suspended midair, and looked up at me. "Don't touch her again or you'll be sorry!" I meant it. I was fully prepared to smash the machine on the floor if he laid another finger on Molly.

I wasn't prepared for his reaction. The mitt dropped to the water and all the color drained from his face. "No, Marge, please—no, hold on. Let's talk about this. Put the tape deck back on the counter, sweetheart. Please?" He was babbling, eyes wide, face white. It seemed an extreme response to the potential loss of a fifty-dollar Panasonic.

"Don't hurt me, Marge. Please."

Realization dawned slowly. He actually thought I was going to toss the machine into the tub.

The bathroom was filled with the sound of George's short hard breaths, the steady drip of the faucet, and gentle piano music, which sounded badly out of place.

"Money, Marge. I'll give you money." His hand fluttered across his bare chest, and when he realized he wasn't wearing a suit he flagged at me with the other hand. "Wait. My checkbook. It's in the bedroom. Let me get it. I'll write you a check."

"Are you insane, George? We're married. We have a joint checking account. Why are you offering me my own money?"

"Well, yes and no." He was himself again, sure-footed in the Wonderful World of Money. His left pupil did a slow float back to center. "Actually, I do have a small account you're not aware of. A little contingency fund, you might say."

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"How little is little?"

He didn't say anything. I shook the tape player and George Winston whined.

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty-five what?"

"Twenty-five thousand."

"We have twenty-five thousand dollars that I don't even know about?"

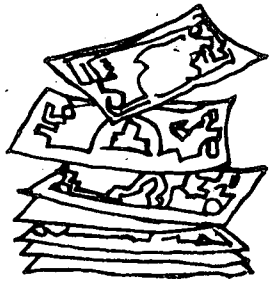
He stuck out his jaw. "Technically it belongs to both of us, but the fact is, I've earned it all. You haven't contributed a thing to our financial situation in over seven years. On a purely objective level, Marge, you've been on the gravy train."

The tape player did a slow tumble through the air, hit the tub, and stopped both Georges dead in the water.

In the hallway outside the bathroom, I slid to the floor and sat there, face in my hands. How could that have possibly happened?

Molly pushed her nose against my hands, nuzzling insistently for my face. I wrapped my arms around her neck. "Molly, it was an accident, an accident, babe."

She didn't say anything, just kept licking my face. Like I said before, I don't mess with Molly's delusions and she doesn't mess with mine.



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a *NEW* Jojo Lorraine story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

Avery took Jojo's hand. "Please, if you can put me in touch with anyone. The paradox is, he must be an honest crook who'll hand the book straight to me and not exploit the stuff for himself. Even if Elaine isn't mentioned, all those other women are, and I don't want to risk their futures."

Jojo snapped her fingers, her smile radiant. "Forget burglars, A! I know of somebody who's better *than a burglar."*

Jojo Lorraine, an actress with two feet on the ground, especially where her friends' troubles are concerned . . .

JOJO AND THE LITTLE BLACK BOOK

by JEFFRY SCOTT

"A tame *what?*" Jojo demanded. Startlement, incredulity, and amusement raised the volume of a voice trained to reach every corner of most theaters without benefit of microphone, so that Avery Harrald blushed and slid down in his chair, shoulders hunching.

Fortunately, they were the restaurant's final patrons of the evening. After a glance assured him of that, Avery repeated stubbornly, "A tame burglar. Well, you *might* know one, Jojo—you know the oddest people. And if you know them, if they're friends of yours, then they must be all right—apart from being criminals, of course."

Jojo's glorious eyes narrowed in silent-movie-heroine suspicion. "One of your harebrained *schemes* is coming on, Avery. Honestly, you're not safe out on your own."

"I really need one," said Avery. Before he could blurt out any

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more, Jojo barred her lips with a coral-tipped finger. "Later. Let's get out of here before they start putting chairs on tables, or eavesdropping to pass the time away. Come home with me and Tell Mama."

The nice thing about Avery Harrald was that her invitation would be taken at face value. A set designer and interior decorator, he was among the small yet not uncommon band of middle-aged bachelors who are uninterested in carnal adventure or macho posturing. A brotherly sort of chap, Avery, and, resignedly, Jojo felt obliged to be protective.

Back in the flat, he straightened her pictures, switched a vase from windowsill to coffee table—evidently the color contrast between ceramic and curtain offended him—and, after several false starts, managed a semi-coherent explanation.

There were three main characters in the drama, he told her. "Cheap to cast," Jojo couldn't help reflecting. They were, he said over her comment, a merchant banker called Robin Strinley, who rated the occasional sentence in gossip columns and was Avery's second or third cousin once or twice removed, Avery's stepsister Eileen, and her husband, William Brace.

Jojo knew the trio—hardly more than by sight, in Robin Strinley's case. The Braces and Avery had rented a villa at Antibes one summer in the 1970s, and Jojo unwound there for a long weekend following the Cannes Film Festival. She recalled Eileen Brace as suspiciously low-profile, submissive, and generally demure for a girl with hot, sloe eyes. William Brace, a decade older than his wife, urged everyone to call him Bill. He owned supermarkets, but had never got over being a rugby football player at international level, a British Lion in his day. Quite dense, quite boring, quite likeable.

"What did you think of Robin when he came to that dinner party? I mean, you must have formed an impression," Avery probed.

"I didn't like him one bit. On the other hand, part of me insisted that I'd like him a whale of a lot in bed." Jojo noted her friend's concern. "Not to worry, Avery—your Robin counts on those vibes, which put me right off him. I'll make an utter fool of myself over a man, I've had endless practice, but I draw the line at being a *predictable* fool."

Avery nodded glumly. "I shouldn't say it—we grew up together and were more like brothers than distant relatives when we were

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kids at boarding school—but Robin is a pig over women. To them, I mean. His manners are perfect."

Jojo freshened his scotch. "So you're afraid that Robin and your sister Eileen are having an affair."

A dark exclamation mark and a few commas sprang into place on the white carpet from Avery's spilt drink. "Good heavens, no!" The fervent denial was spoiled when he added, "I'm sure it was over long ago. If it happened at all. Robin loses interest after a week. Three weeks is the equivalent to lifelong fidelity with him."

Gossip had never been Jojo's favorite thing, unless it served a useful purpose. Frowning, she said, "I can't see the problem, then. Robin and Eileen had a fling once upon a time. Obviously Bill never had an inkling of it—with a temper like his, Mr. Strinley would have landed in Intensive Care otherwise, yes?"

Nodding again, Avery's grey curls, long face, and mild expression put her in mind of an intelligent sheep. "Never mind hospital, it would be the mortuary if Bill ever found out. He played rugger for England, you know. They called him The Widowmaker. Sports-page hyperbole, naturally, but Bill can be horribly physical."

"But he didn't find out," Jojo tested. Something in his eye warned her of a flaw in the argument. "Ah, now I'm with you. Bill didn't find out, but he *might*. Forget it, Avery. Eileen struck me as a cool customer—when dressed and vertical, anyway. Proving an affair long after the event isn't easy. If anyone throws mud, she'll deny everything, indignantly at that, and very likely end up with a new diamond bracelet as a forgive-me present from poor old Bill."

Blinking at her, Avery murmured, "You're a terrible cynic, Jojo."

Half impatient, half amused, she accused: "You don't have enough to do, A. Otherwise you wouldn't invent hypothetical problems. Join a tennis club, take up jogging. Get married."

His distress shamed her. She gave him a hug. "Okay, I'm a rotten audience. Tell me the rest, I promise not to heckle."

Returning the hug in a comradely, abstracted manner, he sighed. "It's Robin. He's—deficient, is the only way I can put it. He does and says awful things without having the faintest idea that they're vulgar at best, unforgivable at worst." Avery laughed self-consciously. "I sound like a bad parody of Oscar Wilde. But Robin really is a shocker."

"Be specific," Jojo commanded.

"All right. I must be, actually, to explain what's wrong." He rose from the couch and started pacing.

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"I've noticed this with womanizers—Robin doesn't like females. Chasing them interests him, but he doesn't enjoy their company. For instance, he's forever fixing up expeditions for the three of us—me, Bill, and himself—and they're always boxing matches, football games, that sort of thing. For years now, we've played snooker every Thursday evening. It isn't an accident that these outings are unlikely to interest Eileen or any woman friend I might want to bring along. He clearly wants men-only nights." Avery broke off. "What's so funny?"

Jojo stifled herself. "Darling, you playing snooker and sitting through boxing matches!"

"Now you're stereotyping me." Avery was unruffled. "I'm a good snooker player, actually. Better than Bill, and Robin's equal. I admit I shut my eyes during the boxing matches. The other two never notice. Frankly, I'd rather not be involved, not regularly, but it's better for me to be there. Bill gets drunk too easily and Robin's sense of humor can be cruel."

"You certainly are big brother, bless your heart. No offense, sweetie, but it's past midnight. Can we cut to the chase?"

A ruefully lopsided smile rewarded her. "I was afraid you'd pin me down. I hate thinking about it, far less talking about it." Avery cracked his knuckles, heedless of her wince.

"Last month, none of us wanted to call it a night when we'd finished with snooker, so we went back to Robin's flat. It's a fabulous place, full of gadgets, and we sat around and drank too much and—" Avery became uneasy. "Men on their own generally end up discussing the same subject."

"Women, too," Jojo assured him. "Carry on."

He shrugged unhappily. "It was a solo performance—a monologue, virtually. I have pitifully few conquests to boast of, and wouldn't if I had. Bill's your typical rugger player, lots of blue stories and locker-room limericks, but he's devoted to Eileen, would never be unfaithful to her, and—" he smiled conspiratorially "—I suspect his erotic exploits before he settled down with Eileen were conducted in such a fog of booze and after-the-game euphoria that he doesn't really remember what went on. So, anyway, Robin held the floor.

"You know how it is when somebody makes a harmless-enough remark but you sense it will trigger disaster? I felt that, for no reason, when Bill mentioned a woman the two of them knew. He said something about it being a shame, anyone that gorgeous detesting men and being cold as ice.

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"Robin smirked at him, as if that was all *he* knew. Bill got the needle. 'You talk a good fight, Robbo,' he said, 'but I'll bet you don't have half the women you claim—it's mainly wishful thinking and downright bloody lies.' He didn't mean it as a challenge, he was drunk enough to be heavy-handed in his teasing, but Robin was furious, it touched a nerve. I suppose being a stud is what keeps him sane. He went over to the Regency desk he has in the bay window and unlocked the top drawer. I noticed the key was on the same bunch as his latchkey and I'm sure Bill noticed it, too. That *is* relevant, not just rambling.

"When Robin turned around, he was holding up one of those old-fashioned school exercise books with heavy cardboard covers and lots of pages, clamped open about a third of the way through." Avery's mouth quirked at a sour taste. "A Polaroid snapshot was taped to the left-hand page—a woman sitting on the edge of a bed. I recognized her at once. She'd die if she knew I had seen it—if she imagined that anyone but Robin knew it existed, for that matter. Any trashy magazine carries more explicit stuff, but it was upsetting because she was smiling at the camera so lovingly. It was a personal thing, a gift of trust from her—we had no right to see it and Robin was utterly wrong to show us."

"Robin," Jojo observed, "is a real four-letter man."

"Amen to that. At any rate, he waved the book at us and said something to the effect, 'Still think she's cold, Bill?' Then he put the book back in the drawer and locked it away. But there was time for me to see that the facing page had several lines of his handwriting.

"I was appalled and so was Bill. We told him so, but, as I said before, Robin's a barbarian about some things. He genuinely couldn't understand why we were shocked and disgusted. He said that the—" Avery struggled for a phrase "—the 'trophy book' wasn't pornographic, it was just a kind of diary. Details on women with whom he'd had affairs—where he'd met them, their tastes in food and drink and entertainment. 'That happened to be a sexy shot, but most of them could be used in a passport,' he told us. 'I only take the picture to remind me what they looked like—they blur after a year or two.' "

Sipping her Perrier, Jojo inquired, "Doesn't he realize the risk—"

"Of it falling into the wrong hands?" Avery completed for her.

"Exactly my point! Supposing Robin was burgled, imagine what a blackmailer could do with that notebook!"

Avery shrugged. "That wasn't the worst of it. Bill, not realizing the desk was locked, tried to wrench the drawer open. In fairness

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to him, he wasn't planning to read the book, just destroy it, I'm sure. Robin jeered at him, said his diary was private and personal. 'Better for you to remain in ignorance, Billy,' he said—and he gave me such a look, Jojo, it made me feel ill. Suddenly I wondered whether he and Eileen—whether *her* photograph might be in there. Bill was too drunk to cotton on or Robin wouldn't have dared."

He tailed away, and she said, "Except that you're beginning to wonder whether Bill *did* cotton on."

Avery stared at her. "Yes, that's exactly what is worrying the life out of me."

"Drunks usually know more of what's going on than the people around them imagine," said Jojo. "My theory is that they're like wild animals—they may not make sense of the actual words, but they pick up on the tone of voice."

"Who knows? I hustled Bill away and phoned Robin when I got home and begged him to destroy the book at once. He said I was making a fuss over nothing, and Bill's indignation was just envy. He told me to get lost and hung up.

"Well, I learned that Bill went to see him next day on much the same mission. He got Robin to agree to destroy the book, but he was sulky about it, and evasive. Bill doesn't believe he did it and neither do I.

"Our outings don't happen any more. Eileen tells me Bill hasn't been to the office in days, he just sits at home brooding. She's a bundle of nerves. She assumes the business is in trouble. I can't tell her what's eating him, in case she does something silly—such as confess. If there is anything to confess. Bill Brace is a lovely man beneath the bluster, but when it comes to his wife he isn't rational."

Dry-washing his face, Avery either shook himself or shivered. "When Bill builds up a sufficient head of steam, he'll confront Robin and demand to see the book. He'll say it's to destroy it himself and make sure. He may even believe that, but he *will* look for Eileen in there. If Robin refuses to let him have it, or even stalls, Bill is perfectly capable of breaking his neck."

He took Jojo's hand. "That's why I have to find a burglar, get hold of that infernal book. Please, if you can put me in touch with anyone. The paradox is, he must be an honest crook who'll hand it straight to me and not exploit the stuff for himself. Even if Eileen isn't mentioned, all those other women are, and I don't want to risk their futures."

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Jojo snapped her fingers, her smile radiant. "Forget burglars, A! I know of somebody who's *better* than a burglar."

Momentarily frozen by Jojo's words, Steve Pagram stood with brush suspended until a golden droplet of varnish splashed onto the jetty, breaking the spell. "*Better* than a burglar, huh?" He rested the brush across the open tin of varnish. Jojo, getting no answer to her phone call, had driven down to his Thames-side cottage, anyway. As she'd hoped, he was working on his sailing dinghy.

Pagram was wirily compact, overtly patient, with unreadable eyes and a matching face, which might have been handsome if allowed a shade more mobility and emotion. Officially, publicly, he was a Canadian. But only officially and publicly. Jojo happened to know he came from the other side of the border.

"Of course you're better, darling," she scolded. "You're a spook, a spy, the Man Who Steals the Plans, so you must be a whiz at burglary and lock-picking and safecracking, it stands to reason."

Casting a wistful glance at the upturned boat, Pagram said under his breath, "I'm not hearing this." And belatedly, a fraction louder, "Ex-spook. I retired."

"Spook, ex-spook," Jojo said airily, "I'm sure it's like riding a bicycle. Once learned, never forgotten."

"Keep it up." Pagram turned grimly jovial. "Tell enough people I'm a spook and Special Branch will send me Stateside on the great iron bird with no return ticket. The company would love that, seeing as I got off the payroll by promising to stay this side of the Atlantic."

Jojo had the grace to sound contrite. "I haven't told anyone but you—just now. And *you'll* never tell. Steven, I've been close-mouthed as an oyster lo these many years, true?"

"True," he conceded. Crow's-feet deepened at the corners of his eyes, his closest approach to a beaming smile. "You look great. You always look great."

Jojo did a twirl for him. "Mini-skirt. Because you're a leg man, darling. I'm going to reduce you to a pathetic, whimpering hunk of humanity and bend you to my will."

"Sounds good," Pagram commented politely. "Come on, kid, I'll make us coffee. American coffee. And I'll listen. Around you, it's the only way to go. But chances are that I won't do whatever dumb thing it is you have in mind for me."

As soon as coffee had perked and was poured, she took a deep breath, preparing for the pitch. Pagram slid out from beside her on

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the kitchen bench to lean against the sink with arms folded. "This is a briefing, if you will. Rive Gauche perfume and a knee pressing mine ever so gently under the table are enemies of a wise decision."

Jojo's wounded glance was perfect, but he waited.

Apart from a muttered "Sweet character" on hearing of Strinley's documenting of amours, Pagram listened intently—impassively.

"Robin's a compulsive womanizer and I'd bet my life Eileen is just as amoral in her sly way," Jojo ended up. "Not nice people, I'm afraid. If it was just them, I wouldn't be trying to help Avery. But Bill Brace is a loving husband and a nice fellow, even if he is a bit of a caveman. I'd hate to see him in prison, ruined, for scragging Robin or his wife, or the pair of them. And it doesn't stop there. There are all those other women in the book. I keep thinking what could happen in the way of scandal and destruction if Bill *did* go berserk and somehow Robin's black book survived intact. Once it was evidence, being pored over by police and lawyers—"

"Messy," Pagram agreed. "But from where I stand, your friend Avery is jumping at shadows and you've let him spook you, too. I've seen Bill Brace on *World of Sport* on Saturday afternoons. He does that Memory Lane spot every so often. Strikes me as a pretty solid-type guy, not that likely to go crazy."

Jojo hissed in irritation. "Haven't you been listening? Bill is *dotty* about his wife! He's built like a tank and he's obsessed with getting hold of Robin's boudoir dossier to discover whether he has good reason for jealousy. Any day now he'll explode and a lot of people are bound to get hurt."

Pagram contemplated the kitchen floor. "Yep," he said at last, "I believe you're right."

"Brilliant! Then you'll steal the book for us!"

Pagram looked infuriatingly surprised. "No, Jojo, I won't. Honey, you haven't thought this thing through. Now listen to me—"

Skeptical, disappointed, Jojo took herself off soon afterward. "You'd better be right," she warned him as he walked her to the cottage gate.

"I generally am," Pagram countered.

Sometimes Jojo wondered what she saw in him.

Within a week, Robin Strinley was mugged in the basement parking area of his apartment block. Given London's crime rate, it was a piffling incident but that didn't prevent the tabloid end of Fleet

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Street making a meal of the affair. Their picture libraries had plenty of shots of Robin with a variety of minor starlets and less minor models at clubs or charity premieres, and there's nothing like bosoms and beaming smiles to brighten readers' breakfasts and circulation figures alike.

PLAYBOY BANKER FELLED IN MAYFAIR SAVAGERY was a typical headline. More prosaically, Robin Strinley had got off lightly. Some person or persons had jumped him, late at night, only to be frightened away by a false alarm. That was evident because he'd been knocked out toward 11:00 P.M. and not found until an hour later, prone and mildly concussed. His wallet, Rolex, and gold signet ring were still in place and his Porsche was beside him, driver's door temptingly open and key in the ignition.

Jojo, having risen at dawn to shoot a TV commercial, learned all this long after the event, when she got home and caught up on the papers. She had just finished reading the soberest report when the doorbell rang.

The second she opened the door, Avery Harrold bounded in, transformed from worried sheep into boisterous Old English sheepdog. He hugged her, spun her off her feet, and smacked a kiss on her cheek. "Robin's in hospital and the book is burnt! All's right with the world!"

"Sit down, slow down. I take it Robin will live, then."

"Two black eyes and a vile headache," Avery confirmed. "Serve him right, the—beastly man. Now that book is history, I can fulfill the ambition of a recent lifetime and shun him." Avery, kindest of souls, sparkled with excitement and gratification.

Flopping onto the couch, he went on. "He hasn't a clue what happened. For all he knows, the sky fell on him last night. It was Bill, of course. Oh, he's acting the innocent, but the moment I knew Robin was in no danger, I went straight round to Bill and Eileen's. Bill looked ten years younger—and there was this terrible stench of charred paper all over the house. Eileen says he came in late last night, locked himself in the study, and kept her awake when he *did* get to bed, chortling to himself."

"We live," Jojo commented vaguely, "in stirring times." Her mind was elsewhere—at a cottage by the Thames, grappling with the puzzle of its omniscient tenant.

Avery persisted. "Bill is *happy*, don't you get it? Happy and blissfully relieved. And he's treating Eileen like a mixture of Titania and Mrs. Thatcher, an object of adoration and slight fear. I do believe

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she'll be getting that diamond bracelet you predicted. It stands out a mile: Bill socked Robin, borrowed his keys, and snaffled the book. At the risk of laboring the point, he's euphoric now because Eileen wasn't in the book, after all."

Jojo said, "I hope Bill's euphoria stands up to prison. He might finish there, you know."

"Never," scoffed Avery. "Certainly Robin will smell a rat when he finds the black book missing, but what can he do? If he goes to the police, they'll want to know why Bill would do such a thing and I can't see even Robin having the gall to go into fine detail on the motive. He's beside himself with rage over those tabloid stories as it is. Bad for the image, my dear. I doubt whether Robin will make the main board of the bank, after all."

"Too tragic."

"Isn't it just. Really, life can be almost sensually satisfying sometimes, in its little twists and turns—the banana peel awaiting some confident swine's triumphant stride. I'm only just understanding how much I disliked my second cousin."

Jojo gave him an absent-minded smile, hardly listening when he added, "I didn't need a burglar, after all, so it was just as well your chap refused to help. Bill came up trumps—and Eileen, too, of course. Now that I *know,* I'm mortified at ever dreaming she'd be unfaithful."

He jogged her elbow gently. "Do you feel like celebrating, my treat—dinner at Frederick's with a sinful amount of champagne?"

She emerged from the reverie with a gasp. "Sorry, sweetie, previous engagement. Oh, look at the time, I'm going to be *spectacularly* late."

"No sweat," Pagram soothed, "I aim to barbecue some burgers, is all. The charcoal's still red, I have time to spare." They were sitting on his patio in twilight, watching the aerial ballet of bats pursuing invisible midges above the river.

Jojo spoke accusingly. "I hate it when you're all bland and laid back with me. Steven, you've been up to something. I may be three moves behind and playing with chess pieces on a Snakes and Ladders board, but I have just enough savvy to work *that* out. What's been going on, and don't dare sweet-talk me."

Pagram raised his Budweiser can, toasting her. "Gee, you're pretty when you get mad."

"Talk, or you'll have an exclusive view of how pretty I am when

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I'm walking away and never having anything to do with you again as long as I live!"

"Playing hardball, huh? What's the matter? The way I read the papers, everything's jake."

"How could you possibly know it would be? How did you know Eileen *wasn't* in that blasted book, for instance? Leave it alone, you said. I have this hunch, this good feeling about things, you said."

"Was I wrong?" He crushed the can one-handed, tossed it into a carton beside his chair, got up, and started laying patties on the barbecue grid. When they were arranged to his liking, he reminded her, "You hadn't thought things through, hon. Stealing the book would be dumb. Bill Brace had to see for himself, otherwise he'd always wonder—and that doubt would fester for maybe a year, maybe five, before he exploded."

"I can see that. But your let-'em-get-on-with-it policy was so *dangerous,* Steve. Supposing he had *killed* Robin, in getting the keys off him? Great upbeat ending, wife vindicated, husband reassured—and stuck in prison for the rest of his natural life."

Patient as ever, Pagram said, "Brace is a jock—well, former jock, still slices the same way. Raised on contact sport, moreover—"

Jojo groaned. "Yes, darling, I know."

"Jocks have certain skills, aptitudes, experience, right? If Brace wanted to stun Strinley, then he'd stun him. If he really wanted to stop his clock, he'd know how much harder to slug him, and where. Nah, Robin was safe enough, providing he hadn't put the horns on Bill."

"But how could you know Eileen wasn't in the book? I was sure she must be, I had a shrewd idea of how she ticked. You've never set eyes on the silly bitch, but you knew better. I could kill you."

Pagram said, "Your hair is an exact match to that honeysuckle, how about that?" When she drew breath to blast him, he extended a hand. "Okay, okay, come with me."

He led Jojo riverward across the shaggy lawn until they reached the birdbath, a stone basin set on a squat pillar. "We're going to light a pyre, kid. Or maybe a beacon. I like beacon better."

"Stop changing the subject."

"We haven't left it." Pagram pulled something from the hip pocket of his jeans. "What makes you think I was sure Eileen wasn't in the book? Wrong. She was in it."

Jojo's bemusement conjured up another of his marginal smiles. "Sure she was. Like you said, it figured."

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"I seem to have lost my place," Jojo announced crossly. "Eileen *had* cheated on her husband and she *was* in the book. But Bill took the book—and he's happy, he's over the moon, Avery told me so. Unless—no, Bill isn't that noble, he couldn't have destroyed Robin's ledger without looking inside."

"Good call. Brace is happy because he did look, and there was no trace of Eileen among the entries. After you told me what might go down, I visited Robin Strinley's crib before Brace got around to it. Leaving no trace. They teach you all that good stuff at spook school.

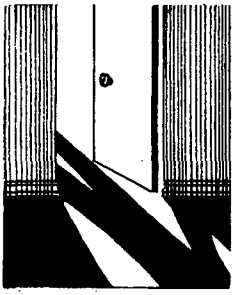
"Once I'd got in and opened the desk, I found the entry for Eileen and cut those two pages out with a razor so close to the spine that only forensic tests could prove they were ever there. That's taught in spook school as well."

"Devious!" Jojo crowed, flinging her arms around him. "And better than stealing the black book because—"

"Brace gets to keep his illusions and Eileen gets to keep her marriage—and maybe her head on her shoulders. Everybody wins. Not counting Robin Strinley, but who cares?" Pagram's tone turned plaintive. "You really know how to take the fun out of sneakiness, though, kid. Spooks hate explaining stuff."

"Get out, you adore boasting." Jojo leaned back in his arms. "Where does the beacon come in?"

Pagram freed himself to retrieve two oblongs of paper from where they had fallen on the dewy turf. He tore them in half, then quarters, and dropped the fragments into the birdbath's empty stone cup. "Eileen's pages. The rest of the little black book is ashes, now they can join it." Thumbing his lighter, he passed it to her. "Your honor, friend."



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Maybe Danny only imagined it. His mother was looking at Louis, but it was as though he was far away, as though she watched him through thick glass, the way you watch a plane take off. . .

THE NEED

by JAMES SALLIS

This one wore grey-cotton slacks, a chambray shirt, and a corduroy sportcoat with the sleeves pushed up almost to the elbow. He propped himself against the doorjamb and smiled. He had a kindly, gentle way about him.

"This is Louis," Mom told me. She was leaning toward him the way she does, not really touching, but she put a hand lightly on his arm as she spoke.

"Hi, Danny," he said. "Homework?"

I looked up from my notebook. "Sort of."

"Like school?"

I nodded.

"What's your favorite?" he asked me.

"History, probably."

"That's unusual for someone your age." He came over and sat down on the bed beside me as Mom went for drinks. "I teach," he said. "Humanities, at the university. History, philosophy, art, literature. Your mom says you're a great reader. I can see that." He looked at the stacks of books and journals, the crates of file folders.

"Yes, sir."

"Louis. Not sir. Do you have any favorite writers?"

"Dickens and Twain, I guess. Victor Hugo."

"Wells?"

"The *Outline of History,* yes, sir—Louis. But I don't have much taste for fantasy."

Mom came back with drinks—wine for her, Scotch for Louis, hot chocolate for me—and told me ten minutes to bedtime. I drank the chocolate from the tin mug I've had all my life, went into the bathroom to rinse out the mug and brush my teeth, and then to the living room to tell them goodnight.

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Afterward I lay listening to the rumble of their voices, like faroff trains. They spoke of the university for a time—their mutual acquaintances there, their routines, how they met—then of themselves. Four years ago (for the first time, at age thirty-two), Louis had married a woman with, as they shortly discovered, cancer of the bone. He took a year's leave, borrowed money from his family and friends, and spent that year wholly with Julie. After she died, he went back to work. Several months ago he'd finally paid everyone back. Now he was buying furniture for the two-room apartment he leased at a discount from the school, a piece at a time, his latest acquisition (the "latest possession to possess me," as he put it) a white-pine futon. Slowly the voices grew softer, then withdrew to the bedroom, out of hearing.

Early next morning I heard the front door open and close, then my mother moving about the kitchen.

"Hi, honey, want oatmeal?" she said when I wandered out to the kitchen. She was drinking coffee, rare for her in the morning, and listening to classical music with the volume turned low.

"Louis would like to take you to a movie," she said when the oatmeal was ready. "Just the two of you. At the university film club." She poured another cup of coffee.

"Did he say what film?"

"*Empire of the Sun*. He thinks you'd like it. Would you? Want to go, I mean?"

"When is it?"

"Tonight, I think."

"Sure."

"Then I'll call and tell him it's on."

Glenn Gould worked his way through the Goldberg *Variations* as Mr. Clark's delivery truck coughed itself into life for another day. I was eleven that year.

> JOHN LUNDE. Born 1950, small town in South, perhaps Tennessee. Attended Tulane University, to which he returned for a degree following a tour in Vietnam as a medic. Married at age 23, one daughter, divorced after six years. Freelance journalist, stringer for major Eastern papers. Loved Janet Draper. Died 1982.

"She never says much about your father."

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We were seated at a TCBY eating vanilla yogurt piled with pecans. We'd been out together without Mom at least once every week, mostly to movies, but one time to the Museum of Natural History, another to tour a helicopter factory.

"I get the idea there's not that much to say," I told Louis.

"You remember him?"

"Sometimes, a little—just glimpses. His voice, mostly. All we have left of him is a hat he hung over the back of a chair in Mom's room the day he walked out. She's never moved it."

"She took it pretty hard, then."

"Glad to have him gone, is what she's always said. I think she hated him."

"She didn't go out much for a while, she says."

"Not at first. She never really has, a lot."

"If you don't want anything else, there's still time to catch some ice skating before we meet her."

We did that, then picked Mom up at Tate Hall, where she had piano lessons late on Tuesdays, and went shopping. Louis was looking at desks. We wandered through forests of lacquer, mellamine, and bamboo at Bright Ideas, Pier 1, Storehouse, Made in Denmark. Everyone's favorite was a small red-lacquered one, bright as a cherry and solid as stone, curving gently at every joint and corner. Louis paid for it and arranged delivery for Wednesday, his day off.

One of Mom's students last week, as they paused between movements of a Brahms sonata, had suddenly begun speaking to her of problems at home, and this became the topic for discussion during dinner at Bella Italia on the mall.

"He's a musician, too," Mom said. "A violinist. And he used to make good money doing the restaurant thing, playing in places like this. But in the past few months he's gotten heavily into drugs—cocaine, mostly. He's been missing gigs. Bills are a problem. Collectors come to the door, even to the library where Gail works."

"It's a familiar story," Louis said.

Mom nodded. "What concerns Gail is that she watched as Robert lost all interest, first in her, and then in his music. She says it's almost as though he'd read an article on cocaine addiction and set about trying to match the profile perfectly."

"Addiction does that, I guess—a kind of progressive stripping-down, reduction to the lowest common denominator. Nothing matters any more except that high, that relief. The personality itself is obliterated, finally. The need is all that's left."

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"Well," Mom said. "Enough of that. How was school?"

Louis and I looked at one another. "You first," I said.

"I did okay today," he told her. Then, biting his lower lip: "I may need some help in math."

"You don't teach math," I said.

"But if I did, I'd definitely need help."

"Very funny, guys," Mom said. She pushed her plate away. "You probably did dessert already, too."

"Yet are too much the gentlemen," Louis said, "to allow you to go without."

"We'll join you," I said.

"All heart."

Over cheesecake he told her about the student whose essay was written on the back of ten oversize pizza menus. He'd done it at work and the title was "Why I Hate Pizza."

"Write about what you know," Mom said.

"Exactly."

I tried to look into Mom's eyes without her knowing, wondering if the old restlessness was starting up in there. Maybe I only imagined it. She was looking at Louis, but it was as though he was far away, as though she watched him through thick glass, the way you watch a plane take off.

I excused myself, found the bathroom, and, coming back, overheard the end of their conversation.

"Sometimes he seems more your son than mine," Mom said.

"Janet—"

"I don't want company tonight."

"Jan, I love you."

"I don't want to talk about it now. I'll call when I can."

ERIC KEEL (final entry). Like the others, Eric, suddenly, was gone. I began to understand why, and started this notebook. Over the following three weeks there were sporadic phone messages (I'd listen to them when I got home from school, then rewind the tape) and one final, tearful goodbye.

I remember something in Cocteau, from the journals, I think—that sexual need, sexual vice, is the most intriguing form of aesthetics. That selections are not made, sequences not

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followed, by the dictates of tastes or choice, but only after exhaustive research and obscure preparation, according to a template of needs that leaves no choice, "a masquerade where his senses desperately construct an equivalent, more baroque, but in fact hardly less individual than any other, for beauty."

I longed to tell him goodbye. To tell him something of what he had meant to me, and that he would not be forgotten, not entirely. That here, in this notebook, like the others he would live on.

Louis called four times the following day. By the fourth call, from anger, tears, or some blend of the two, his voice quavered on the machine. There were no calls the day after—then, midmorning of the next, a letter, weighty in its manila envelope. She would wait until the calls and letters dwindled to nothing, then call them.

I don't know how aware she is of this sequence. Once it begins, apparently, she is not in control.

She doesn't suspect, of course, that I know what happens to them. But perhaps it wouldn't matter if she did.

Louis was waiting outside my school a few days later. "I've missed you," he said.

I nodded.

"How's your mom doing?"

"Depressed, I guess. She sleeps a lot. Comes home, goes to bed—and stays there some days."

"She won't answer my calls."

"I know."

He was wearing a cloth cap, which he took off and stuffed in a coat pocket. "It's hard to get a handle on this. I know she loves me."

"She does."

"So how can she just *go away* like this? Just suddenly not be there? All the things we feel for one another, all our plans—"

We walked on for a block or two silently.

"I have to get back to the college," he said.

"Louis?"

He looked at me.

I almost said: She's going to kill you. Because she loves you, she's

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going to kill you. But I couldn't. I said, "Could I have your cap? I've always wanted one like that."

He took it out and handed it to me. "To remember me by?" he said.

"To wear till I see you again."

"Soon, I hope."

The lies we tell ourselves, or the lies we tell others—which are worse?

Two days later, a Friday, Mom was happy again.

"I thought we'd eat out and catch a movie tonight if that's okay with you," she said at breakfast. She was drinking orange juice from either a very small goldfish bowl or a very large brandy snifter. She held it up and moved it, washing pulp from side to side—Liszt, softly, on the radio.

"By ourselves?"

Was there a brief pause, a catch?

"Just you and me, kiddo. Louis and I—well, he won't be around any more."

"I loved him, Mom. You did, too."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I did."

She was wearing her navy-blue suit with a new red blouse—silk, I think—and had her hair pinned back loosely. Without her glasses, her eyes had a soft, blurred look.

"I've got a student coming in before class, so I have to leave," she said. She went to the sink and rinsed out her glass. "I'll be home early, about the same time as you, and we'll take off right away. Make a night of it. Remember to lock up when you leave."

"Sure, Mom."

After she was gone, I got up and turned off the radio. I stood looking at the bowl of apples, the brass collander catching the morning sunlight against the wall where it hung—all these ordinary things.

I went to get my books and sweater and looked for a moment at Louis's cap on the back of my chair. Then I put his notebook on the shelf with the rest and went on to school.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

When the train arrived in Kanchanaburi, Deane said goodbye to the young newlyweds.

"Aren't you coming out to see the bridge?" the girl asked.

"I'll see it later," he said, "after the crowd leaves. I'm staying over for a couple of days."

He shook hands with both of them and waved farewell as they joined the others from the train who were boarding a tour bus that would take them first to the Buddhist shrine at Nakorn Pathom, then to the spectacular waterfall at Erawan, and finally to the Bridge on the River Kwai itself, which most of the tourists would be disappointed by because of the movie.

An evocative story, told half in flashback, by Clark Howard, whose latest novel, Hard City, *is due out from E. P. Dutton this month . . .*

RETURN TO THE RIVER KWAI

by CLARK HOWARD

The young newlywed couple sharing the first-class train compartment with Deane were fascinated by his knowledge of the bridge.

"Do you mean to say," the girl asked in surprise, "that it's nothing like the bridge in the film?"

"I'm afraid not," Deane replied.

Her new husband frowned. "And it's not made out of bamboo and teak that the POWs cut out of the jungle?"

Deane shook his head. "Entirely of steel," he said.

The young couple looked at each other, visibly disappointed. They

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were Australian, clearly romantics—and obviously adventurous or they wouldn't have been on the train. It was an old narrow-gauge line that ran from Bangkok to Ban Pong, Chungkai, Takanun, and points north all the way into Burma. Like Deane, the young couple was bound for Kanchanaburi, the old walled village nearest the bridge.

"You see," Deane explained, "the bridge wasn't actually built by the prisoners, it was reassembled by them."

"Reassembled?" the girl asked incredulously. "Do you mean put back together?"

"Exactly. It originally crossed a harbor in Java, about seven hundred miles to the south, which was also occupied by the Japanese. They were building a railroad up here to supply their forces that were fighting the British on the Burma-India border. The railroad had to cross the Kwai at some point. One of their engineers figured out that the bridge down in Java would be a perfect fit for a spot where the Kwai passed near Kanchanaburi. So they took it down, disassembled it piece by piece, and had it hauled overland up here. I guess you could say we *re*built it."

"Well, how do you like that?" the young bride said. Her husband tilted his head, still frowning.

"Look," he said, "no offense intended, but you don't really look old enough to have worked on the bridge. And you don't sound British."

"I'm Canadian," Deane said. "My father ran a radio station in Singapore. Both my parents were killed in the bombings, before the city fell. I ended up in a POW camp for women and children in Tamarkan, the next village north. The women there had to cook for the men that were brought up from Changi prison to work on the railway. I was twelve at the time, so the Japs put me to work as a water boy, running up and down the line with canteens hanging from both shoulders." Deane smiled. "On the very first day, some of the men started calling me 'Gunga Deane.' Before long, 'Gunga' was the only name I had."

The Australians stared at him, rapt. "I've a mate back home," the new groom said quietly, "who had an uncle that died working on that Siam-Burma railroad. I guess a lot of men died."

Deane nodded. "Yes, a lot of men. They used to call it the 'railway of death.' " His eyes became fixed for a moment and he reached up to touch a half-moon scar next to his left eye. "Now it's just a tourist attraction to most, I suppose."

All three of them were a little embarrassed by his words, and the

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young couple sat back and fell silent. Deane turned to look out the train window at the lush Thai jungle and the dirty brown water of the lower Kwai just yards from the tracks. Presently, as he stared at the river, a slight smile settled on his lips. The first time he had ever seen Heather, she'd been standing knee-deep in that filthy water, her worn nurse's skirt gathered up around thighs that were alabaster white.

Deane, twelve years old, ragged and dirty, was at the water truck filling his canteens when he glanced down at the river's edge and saw her. She was about twenty, he supposed, a bit thin, with chestnut hair and rather poor posture. There were no dark circles under her eyes, so Deane knew she was one of the new arrivals at the camp. He kept looking at her thighs until she finally saw him. Half smiling, she said, "Getting your eyes full, are you?"

Feeling himself blush, Deane immediately countered, "You're not supposed to be downriver this far. Better not let the Japs catch you down here. You'll get a bamboo stick across your legs."

"I've had worse," the young woman replied disdainfully. Nevertheless, she started wading back upriver where she was supposed to be.

So engrossed was he in watching her go that Deane let one of the canteens overflow and water spilled onto the ground. At just that unfortunate moment, a Japanese guard walked around the front of the truck and, seeing the wasted water, he strode up and slapped Deane smartly across the face, cursing him in Japanese. The boy immediately bowed and said, also in Japanese, "A thousand pardons, honorable superior."

The guard slapped him again. Deane bowed again. "Ten thousand pardons, honorable superior," he said.

The guard cursed him some more and then strode away.

"Your mother is a whore," Deane said in English, adding in Japanese, "honorable superior."

When the train arrived in Kanchanaburi, Deane said goodbye to the young newlyweds.

"Aren't you coming out to see the bridge?" the girl asked.

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would take them first to the Buddhist shrine at Nakorn Pathom, then to the spectacular waterfall at Erawan, and finally to the Bridge on the River Kwai itself, which most of the tourists would be disappointed by because of the movie.

As the bus pulled out, Deane carried his suitcase across the village square to the Royal Imperial Oriental Palace Hotel. It was a tall, narrow, white Colonial building with eight guest rooms, only half of which were ever occupied at any given time. There were two bathrooms, one with a toilet for Europeans, the other with a hole in the corner of the floor for Asians. A narrow verandah with two ceiling fans faced the square, and there was a bar, also with ceiling fans, just off the verandah.

After he checked in, hung up his clothes in the room, changed shirts, and hid his automatic pistol behind a drawer in the wicker bureau, Deane went down to the bar.

"Gordon's and tonic, please," he told the bartender, a bearded man wearing a New Zealand soccer-team T-shirt.

When he came with Deane's drink, the bartender asked, "Not taking the tour, eh?"

Deane shook his head. "Don't like crowds. I'm staying on for a few days, anyway." He took a long, cold swallow before telling the lie to explain his presence. "I'm a writer for a Canadian travel magazine. I might do an article about the area."

"That's a refreshing switch," the bartender said. "Travel articles on Thailand usually concentrate on Bangkok. We don't get much tourist trade up here, except the daily in-and-outs to see the bloody bridge."

"My magazine likes to introduce new places," Deane said casually. "Off-the-beaten-path, unexplored paradises, that sort of thing." He took another swallow, then said, "But maybe I'm too late. Coming up on the train, someone mentioned a television documentary that's already been done."

"That wasn't a travel documentary," the bartender said. "It was a thing about some local men who've formed a group to fight the big lumber interests that are stripping the teak forests."

"Oh, that's what it was," Deane said innocently. He already knew about it—he had the show on tape and had viewed it a dozen times. "Who are the men who formed the group?"

"Business and professional men from the village. There's a lovely teak forest surrounding us here, and the lumber people from the south keep moving nearer and nearer to it. Big market for teak, you

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know: furniture, Venetian blinds, souvenirs. But these local fellows don't care about that. They want to keep the forest intact. They're petitioning the government to make it a national reserve or something."

"That's very interesting." Deane snapped his fingers. "Say, I just might interview them as part of this article. A national teak reserve would certainly add to the area as a tourist attraction. Can you give me their names?" he asked, getting out a small notebook.

"Well, let's see—" The bartender started counting on his fingers. "There's Dr. Chai Badan—you can find him at the village hospital. There's Father Sawan—he'll be over at the mission church. There's Mr. Kobe Sakai, who has the big orchid plantation—"

"Kobe Sakai?" Deane interrupted. "That's not a Thai name, is it?"

"No, Japanese," the bartender said. "He was over during the war, I think. I guess he either stayed over or came back."

"Where'd you say I could find him?"

"At his orchid plantation just south of town." The bartender recollected his thoughts. "Let's see now, there's also—"

Deane got three more names, all of which he already knew from the documentary he'd taped and viewed a dozen times. Along with the names, he now had the locations of the people involved in the movement to save the teak forest. Six people. Five of them Thai. One of them Japanese.

"Thanks very much for your help," Deane said, finishing his drink. He got the bartender's name. "If I do the article, I'll mention you and send you a copy."

Leaving the bar, he returned to his room to get the pistol.

The second time twelve-year-old Deane saw Heather was when he went to the camp's makeshift dispensary to see if they had anything for a suppurating tropical ulcer that had eaten a cherry-size hole in one of his calves. Heather was the nurse on duty.

"My turn to look at *your* legs, eh?" she said, making Deane blush again. "Oh, my, that's ugly. I'm afraid I haven't anything for it, either. Use some of your drinking water to wash it every day."

When Deane made no move to leave, she looked at him with a smile.

"Some of the men working on the track asked me to find out where your group came from," he said.

"Passing information between camps is against regulations."

"So's wading downriver."

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"Cheeky, aren't you?" She raised an eyebrow and glanced around. "We were in a camp in Padang in Sumatra. The Japanese needed nurses up here, so they picked us. Some people have all the luck."

"Okay," said Deane, "thanks." He tilted his head. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Raise just one eyebrow."

"*I* don't know." She saw a tall Japanese officer approaching. "Better scoot," she told Deane.

As he left, Deane noticed that the Japanese officer was also a newcomer. Taller than most of his peers, cleanly handsome, he was dressed in an immaculate green tropical-weight uniform bearing the insignia of a captain. Deane began to limp in case the officer had any notion of hitting him. But the officer paid no attention to him. He seemed to see nothing but Heather.

That night, Deane borrowed a mirror from one of the women assigned to look after the children's barracks and sat in a corner trying to raise just one eyebrow. After an hour, he gave up in frustration and decided it was probably something only girls could do. He returned the mirror and went off around the camp to see what he could scrounge, heading first for the barracks where the nuns were quartered, because they were the most generous when it came to sharing. Later, when it got dark, he planned to climb up on top of the cookhouse to lie on the roof and listen to the activity on the grassy lawn behind it. That was where a few of the women traded favors with the Japanese guards. The women were virtual outcasts in the camp, but they weren't as hungry as most. Personally, Deane saw nothing wrong with what they were doing.

Each day, the grueling work on the railway went on. Every morning, "worker ants," as the British male prisoners called themselves, were lined up and marched from their camp to end-of-track, where they had left off the previous day. As they trudged past the women-and-children's camp, the gate was opened and Deane allowed to join them.

The POW labor force spent each morning hacking a path through the jungle and each afternoon laying ties and tracks through what they had hacked. The work, performed primarily on a bowl of rice and a cup of barely colored tea three times a day, was arduous and pain-wracking—made doubly so by the jungle insects that swarmed over them. Centipedes dropped from the trees into their hair, digging

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their multi-feet into the scalp, making it feel like it was on fire. Fat, shiny-green jungle flies spread cholera everywhere. Malaria was rampant. The heavy wet, the heat, the rot, the poisonous reptiles, and the utter hopelessness reduced their ranks daily, making way for more prisoners to be trucked up from Changi prison in Singapore.

And the terrible rumor persisted that just north of Kanchanaburi they would have to build a bridge over the Kwai.

The orchid plantation south of the village lay off to one side of the road and extended into the jungle farther than one could see. It was laid out in what appeared to be precise geometric lines: lanes about four feet wide connecting six-foot squares, looking from the slightly elevated road much like a vastly enlarged molecular arrangement. From the road, where Deane stood looking down at it, the variety of colors was stunning: purple, white, red, orange, yellow, pale green, mixed blues. Surprisingly, there was no overpowering fragrance, as Deane imagined there would be from such an array of flowers.

As he stood there, the automatic pistol resting uncomfortably in his waistband under the loose safari shirt he wore, a flatbed truck came down the road and pulled up next to a modern mobile home up on concrete blocks, which apparently served as an office for the plantation. A dozen or so Thai women got off the back of the truck and, picking up baskets and pruning shears, proceeded into the orchid field and commenced selective harvesting, snipping some flowers, leaving others.

The driver of the truck went into the office. After a moment, Deane followed him.

"Good afternoon, sir," the driver greeted Deane when he entered. The driver was a young Thai with perfect teeth in a wide smile.

"Is Mr. Sakai about?" Deane asked.

"I'm not exactly sure, sir—I've just returned with our harvesters from the noon meal in the village. He may be in the greenhouse. Shall I take you there? It's only a short walk."

"Yes, please do."

They left the office and Deane followed the young Thai along a path that led into the ocean of orchids.

As they passed a cultivation of small purple blooms, Deane said, almost to himself, "Vandas." His escort smiled in delight.

"Correct, sir. You know the orchid, yes?"

"Just this one," Deane replied . . .

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"What's that?" the boy asked, bobbing his chin at the purple flower in an old bath-salts bottle she had set on a shelf.

"Oh, hello, Gunga. That's an orchid of the Vanda species. They grow wild back behind the camp. Haven't you seen them in the jungle along the track?"

Deane shook his head. "By the time we get anywhere, the jungle's been cut away on both sides." His eyes narrowed. "How'd you *get* out back there? That's a restricted area."

"I didn't. Captain Sakai brought this to me. He's that new officer, the tall one."

"I know who he is. Some of the men think he's a Kempei-tai." The Kempei-tai was the Japanese Army secret police, similar to the Nazi gestapo.

"That's nonsense," Heather said.

"Why hasn't he got an assignment, then?" Deane challenged. "All he does is walk around watching everything. He never even pulls officer-of-the-guard duty."

"Captain Sakai," Heather said evenly, "is a structural engineer. The Japanese are bringing the parts for a bridge up from Java. Captain Sakai is here to oversee it being assembled over the Kwai."

Now Deane's eyes widened. It was true! The railway *was* going to cross the Kwai somewhere near Kanchanaburi. "How long have you known that, Heather?" he asked.

"About half an hour," she replied. "I was going to tell you tonight, so you needn't give me your Sherlock Holmes look. What are you doing here, anyway?"

After glancing around to make certain he wasn't being observed, Deane slipped Heather some Japanese occupation currency from the pocket of his tattered shorts. "One of the sergeants is dying of cholera. He's an old-timer, he's been on the track since the beginning. He wants an egg before he goes. Some of the chaps scrounged the money to buy him one when the village women come around. Will you see to it?"

Heather looked away sadly. "Yes, of course." An egg, she thought. Was there ever anything as insane as war? She slipped the money into a book she had at hand.

Deane noticed its title was in Japanese characters. "What's that book? You don't read Japanese, do you?"

"No, Gunga," the young woman said patiently, "I don't read Japanese. I'm not a spy, either. Nor am I Tokyo Rose on a secret mission. This is a book on the pollination of orchids. It has pictures in it, and

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Captain Sakai, who speaks English, has translated some of the text for me to read. It was written by Charles Darwin, the chap who proved that people like you evolved from monkeys. Except I don't think you've evolved quite far enough." She gave Deane an affectionate shove. "I'll try to get the egg for you this afternoon."

As Deane followed the Thai through the orchid plantation, the young man asked, "Do you perhaps know the meaning of the word 'orchid,' sir?"

"I can't say I do," Deane admitted.

"Not many people do," the Thai said. "It's a Greek word which means testicle. You are surprised, yes? But if you pull up an orchid plant, you will see that its tubers—bulbs, they are sometimes called—closely resemble a man's testicles. Leave it to the Greeks to find that out, eh? Do you know that they used to eat orchids because they believed the flower contained aphrodisiac properties?"

"Interesting," Deane commented. "How far did you say the greenhouse was?"

"A few more meters, sir. You could see the top of it except for the Grammatophyllum there." He pointed to a mixed-color plant that was growing a dozen feet high against lattices anchored in the ground.

For a moment Deane forgot the pistol under his shirt and was caught up by the extraordinary beauty of the cultivation around him. "I never knew they came in so many colors," he said.

"Oh, yes," the Thai boasted. "There are at least fifteen hundred species of orchid—and there may even be twice that many, no one knows for certain. They come in every color you can name except black. There is no such thing as a black orchid. Dark blue, even dark brown, but not black."

"Amazing." Deane stopped and looked around the vast field. "You must supply half the corsages in the world."

"Oh, our orchids are not ornamental," the Thai was quick to explain. "Our orchids are horticulture. Those over there, for instance, which are called Vanilla planifolia, provide beans which are made into vanilla flavoring. The ones next to them are Eulophias, which go into the preparation of *salep,* a common nerve tonic used throughout southeast Asia. The Jumellea there is used in Faham tea. And this beauty here, the Laelia, sad to say, is used in Mexico to make glue. There are many, many uses for the orchid besides making a

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woman more beautiful. Mr. Sakai can tell you much more if you are interested. He is one of the world's foremost experts on the orchid."

He's also a filthy murderer, Deane thought.

"Fascinating, all of it," he said.

By the time the tracks had been laid up to the bank of the Kwai, the disassembled bridge parts arrived from Java. Captain Sakai selected the healthiest British officers from among the undernourished prisoners and conducted classes on how the re-erection was to be accomplished. The officers gladly cooperated, relieved that their men wouldn't have to actually construct a bridge out of jungle wood. The project was launched, and for the next six weeks there was some relief from the grueling work of hacking through the jungle.

In the camp, Heather began accumulating additional specimens of orchids and asked Deane to help her find glass containers for them. "I can't put them in tin," she explained, "because the rust will kill them. If you could scrounge up anything made of glass—"

"Are those flowers yours or Sakai's?" Deane asked curtly.

"Both of ours, I suppose. Why, does it make a difference?"

"I'm not going to help him try to get you out on the grass behind the cookhouse—and that's what he's trying to do," the boy said sullenly.

"Oh, Gunga, please," Heather implored, "if that's all he wanted he could simply rape me."

"The Japs in this camp don't do that," Deane said, with a wisdom born of captivity and daily close association with the male POWs. "These Japs aren't regular Army, they're inductees. They're just plain men who've never been soldiers before. They don't rape women prisoners. They barter with them for favors—or they trick them. You're being tricked, Heather."

"The proper word is seduced," she told him. "And I assure you I'm not being seduced." Her expression softening, she took his hands in hers. "Kobe—Captain Sakai—is just lonely, Gunga, like we all are. He's trying to steal a moment or two of beauty out of this ugly war and this ugly jungle and this ugly existence. Cultivating these orchids helps us both to escape reality for an hour. If he were trying to trick me, as you say, I'd know it, Gunga. I'm not just in from the country, you know. I've been around a little."

"Some of the other women," Deane told her, "don't like you being so friendly with a Jap officer."

"I'm sure they don't," Heather allowed. "But I'm not doing any-

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thing wrong, Gunga. I hope you believe that." With a knuckle she lifted his chin so that he would have to look at her. "Come on, tell me you believe me, Gunga."

Presently he said grudgingly, "All right."

"That's a love," Heather said. She pulled him against her in a brief hug and his face felt her softness through her thin shirt. From that moment on, he was in love with her.

At the greenhouse, the young Thai spoke to one of the workers and then said to Deane, slightly embarrassed, "So very sorry, sir. Mr. Sakai has gone into the cemetery. He will likely be gone for half an hour or so."

"Cemetery?" said Deane. "What cemetery?"

"The Allied War Cemetery, sir. Its boundary is directly behind the greenhouse. Come, I'll show you."

Deane followed the young man around the far end of the big greenhouse to a narrow rear lawn. There he stopped in stunned silence as he stared out at a vast cemetery that lay between the edge of the orchid plantation and the River Kwai in the distance. "My God—"

"You did not know of the cemetery, sir?" the Thai asked.

"No."

"It is very beautiful, is it not?"

Deane's eyes swept the landscape. Row after row of neat, precise stone markers stretched between paths of manicured grass. The markers were raised several inches from a stone base, their top surfaces slanted thirty degrees for easier reading of the bronze plaque attached to the top. Between the markers, flowers grew.

"Do you not think it is beautiful, sir?" the Thai asked again.

"Yes, very beautiful," Deane replied quietly. "In a way."

"There are eight thousand buried here. All were prisoners, all worked on the Burma-Siam railroad."

Deane nodded solemnly. The railway of death. "You say Mr. Sakai is in the cemetery someplace?"

"To be sure, sir. He goes into the cemetery for a while every day, to put fresh orchids on some of the graves."

How nice. Deane forced a smile. "Suppose I just walk around a bit. Perhaps I'll run into him. If not, I'll return to the greenhouse in half an hour or so."

"As you wish, sir." The young Thai bowed and walked away.

Wetting lips that despite the humid air had suddenly gone dry,

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Deane stepped onto the nearest path and began walking slowly along a row of markers. *Eight thousand prisoners.* To build a bloody goddamn railroad.

Pausing, he took a folded handkerchief from his trousers pocket and patted perspiration from his neck. At his feet were one of the eight thousand markers. He read the chiseled words:

6142276 Private
H. G. T. Wilson
The East Surrey Regiment
27th May 1943 Age 24
A Voice We Love Is Still
A Place Is Vacant
Which We Can Never Fill

Deane wondered if he had known him. There were always a few Wilsons working on the track at any given time. May of '43 would have been early in the work, months before the bridge had been thrown up. This Wilson had probably been in one of the first labor forces sent up from Changi prison in Singapore. How had he died? Deane wondered. Cholera? Malaria? Malnutrition? Bayonet?

Sighing, blinking back a wetness in his eyes, Deane again looked out over the vast graveyard. Was Heather here? No, not likely. The last time Deane had seen her, Sakai had been dragging her by the arm aboard a motor launch that some of the Japanese officers had commandeered to escape up the Kwai in the face of the Allied paratrooper advance. He had watched helplessly from up in a tree where he was hiding as the boat disappeared into the jungle.

Only God knew where Heather was.

But he knew where Sakai was.

As he had done on the train, Deane reached up to touch the scar near his left eye. Then he walked farther into the cemetery, the metal of the pistol rubbing against his stomach with each step.

When the bridge was completed, Captain Kobe Sakai was assigned to remain in the camp as officer in charge of its maintenance. Deane was sitting behind the dispensary experimenting with rolling a cigarette when Sakai told Heather about the assignment.

"Oh, Kobe," he heard her say, "I'm so sorry. I know you wanted to be posted back to Japan."

"Yes," he said in very precise English, "I had hoped to see my parents again soon. But in a way I am not sad because it means I will be able to stay near you."

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"Kobe, we agreed to avoid personal feelings."

"We might as well attempt to avoid daylight and nightfall," he said.

"We must try," she insisted.

Squinting through a crack in the bamboo wall, Deane saw the Japanese officer bow slightly. "I will continue to try," he said. Then he reached into his tunic. "I have something for you. For both of us, actually." He handed her a small book. "It's the *Monograph of World Orchidaceae* by J. M. Godfery. I had one of the supply officers pick it up at the city library on the last convoy to Bangkok. It's in English, too."

"Oh, Kobe." Heather opened the book and turned the pages. "How sweet. You are so thoughtful."

Slick is what he is, Deane thought as he eavesdropped. God, Heather was so stupid! Been around, sure! Putting away the cigarette makings, he stalked away, disgusted and angry. Heather was hopeless, that was all there was to it. She simply couldn't be relied upon to take care of herself. He was going to have to see to it for her.

Deane made up his mind to kill Kobe Sakai.

It couldn't be done at once, of course. Such a drastic move required careful planning. The outright killing of a Japanese officer could result in the execution by hanging of fifty randomly selected prisoners from the men's camp. That was too high a price to pay, even to save the woman he loved from permanent disgrace and contempt. No, the death of Captain Sakai had to appear either accidental or natural. Accidental, such as drowning or being bitten by something poisonous in the jungle; natural, such as contracting cholera or malaria. The latter might not be fatal, Deane knew, but at least it would get the slick bastard sent away to a hospital somewhere.

It was two weeks before Deane had formulated a plan and was ready to put it to work. He chose the first Saturday night of the month, when the women put on their monthly music-hall revue. Amateur singing and dancing was performed in the camp's *tenko,* or roll-call, area. The men were allowed, under guard, to march down from their own camp and sit outside the barbed-wire fence to watch the show. Many of the Japanese officers also attended, and the guards were occupied watching the men prisoners. The theme for this particular night's entertainment was the River Kwai itself:

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either original material written about the bloody river they had all come to hate, or non-original material adapted to fit the theme.

One of the most popular acts that night was the wife of an artillery colonel who sang "I Kwaied for You" in a bawdy, low-down style. There was much applause, cheering, and whistling when she was finished, and she was brought back for several encores. During her repeat performances, Deane slipped away and scurried through the shadows to his barracks, where he retrieved a rubber-banded rations box from under the porch. Carrying it carefully, he made his way back around the *tenko* area to the Japanese officers' barracks. There were lights on in only two of the rooms, and the barracks was otherwise deserted. Deane had already reconnoitered the premises and knew which room was Captain Sakai's.

Easing himself inside, he was able, in the moonlight coming through the window, to locate Sakai's bunk and carefully unsnap and lift up the mosquito netting a few inches. Removing the rubber bands from the rations box, he set it on the bunk inside the netting, flipped off the top, and jerked his hand out. The poisonous river viper he had caught slithered quickly out of the box and sought refuge under the pillow. Deane snatched back the box and snapped the netting securely closed.

He was slipping back out of the room into the hall when a roving barracks guard butt-stroked him in the face with his rifle and knocked him cold.

When he awoke, Heather was kneeling next to him, pressing a wet compress against his swollen, split-open cheek. Captain Sakai was also there, with three guards, looking suspiciously around the room. The empty rations box was on the floor, and a corner of the captain's mosquito netting was in disarray. Taking a rifle from one of the guards, Sakai attached its bayonet, opened one side of the mosquito netting, and probed his bunk with the bayonet. The frantic viper slithered off the bunk to a corner of the floor. Sakai handed the rifle back to the guard, who hurried over and speared it on the bayonet.

Sakai looked grimly down at Deane. "I will have you hanged for this," he said quietly.

"Kobe," Heather pleaded, "he's just a boy—"

"Boy or man, I would be no less dead," the Japanese said coldly. He spoke crisply to the guards and two of them pulled Deane roughly onto his feet and pinioned him between themselves.

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"Kobe, please—" Heather said beseechingly, clutching Sakai's arm.

"Don't beg the bastard!" Deane snapped.

Sakai stepped over to him, a frown compressing his handsome face. "Why did you do it?" he asked. "I have never done you harm."

"I did it to keep you from—hurting her." The words fell at the end, as if he were suddenly not sure of them.

"Hurting her?" Sakai said, puzzled. "I have no intention—"

"He means *having* me," Heather explained. She lowered her eyes. "He means disgracing me."

Sakai's frown gave way to incredulity. He shook his head in disbelief. "Young fool," he muttered. "Take him out," he told the guards.

"Kobe, please let him go!" Heather began pleading again. The guards started for the door with Deane. "Kobe, no! Let him go. For me, Kobe! For me!"

Sakai gave an order and the guards stopped. His eyes locked searchingly on Heather's. "For you?" he asked pointedly.

Heather looked down at the floor again. "Yes. For me."

Sakai turned to the guards. "Take him back to his barracks and release him."

As Deane was being led down the hall, he heard the door to Sakai's room close.

Walking deep into the Allied cemetery, thoughts of Heather brought tears to Deane's eyes again. He knew Heather had given herself to Kobe Sakai that night to keep Deane from being hanged. He had never spoken of it to her, nor she to him, in the time they remained together. It became common knowledge in the camp that Heather went to Sakai's room several nights a week, and she quickly became a pariah, like the women who traded favors with the guards on the grass behind the cook shed. But Deane loved her even more now, glad to still be alive, glad that the only physical scar he had from the experience was the half moon next to his left eye.

The railway of death was completed in November 1943, and the men prisoners who were left were taken back to Changi prison in Singapore. The women and children remained in the Kanchanaburi camp and life, such as it was, continued unchanged except that now several trains a day ran up and down the tracks, transporting Japanese troops and supplies from the Malay peninsula to the front lines in Burma.

During 1944, the Siamese natives brought into the camp occa-

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sional rumors that gladdened the hearts of the prisoners. MacArthur had returned to the Philippines. Vinegar Joe Stilwell was marching across north Burma. Merrill's Marauders and Wingate's Raiders were striking here, there, and everywhere in southeast Asia, giving the Japanese fits. Howlin' Mad Smith and his Marines had taken Iwo Jima. Ironpants LeMay and his superfortresses had begun daylight bombing of the Japanese mainland. The Pacific War was in its twilight.

The end came one day in August 1945 when there was a great droning sound from the sky and everyone ran out into the *tenko* area and looked up to see two Liberators circling in the sky. Presently a mushroom of leaflets burst above them and floated with maddening slowness down to earth. The leaflets carried the message they had prayed for: the war was over, Japan had surrendered. Allied troops, doctors, and supplies would parachute in at noon the next day.

It was later that afternoon when Deane had watched helplessly from a tree as Kobe Sakai dragged a struggling Heather aboard the commandeered motor launch and disappeared with her up the River Kwai. The memory of that scene had lain inert in Deane's subconscious until the night in his apartment in Toronto when he had watched a television documentary about a group of men in Thailand who were trying to prevent lumber barons from raping the teak forests. One of those men was part of Deane's dormant memory—Kobe Sakai.

Well into the cemetery now, Deane paused to look around. There were others about, but not many. Far off on another path, an older couple stood by a marker. Here and there, cemetery groundskeepers trimmed and edged. In one area, a group of schoolchildren in blue-and-white uniforms were listening as a nun taught them about the cemetery. And over near the riverside boundary, where the markers ended and the ground sloped down to meet the Kwai, a figure walked alone, a wicker basket supported by a strap around his neck, stopping at the markers in the last row and stooping to place something on each grave. Squinting, Deane saw that the man was leaving fresh orchids.

It was Sakai.

Deane walked slowly but purposefully toward him. Glancing around, he saw the only others near the last row were two women, both wearing ankle-length Thai dresses, who were walking along an adjacent path. If he moved quickly enough, Deane thought, he

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could confront Sakai, pull the gun, and force him out of the cemetery into the thick overgrowth next to the river, and the women would never notice. Bracing himself, he accelerated his pace.

As Deane approached, he saw again, as he had in the television documentary, that Kobe Sakai was, in his sixties, still as handsome as he had been in his twenties. His hair was grey and he wore glasses now, and a hearing aid, but otherwise he appeared quite fit. He'd probably have another fifteen or twenty years left if it wasn't for me, Deane thought coldly. Slipping the pistol from under his shirt, he held it down at his side as he walked up to the man with the flowers.

"Hello, Captain Sakai," he said evenly.

Sakai looked at him without responding.

"I didn't expect you'd recognize me," Deane said. "Remember the boy who put the river viper in your bunk?"

Sakai shrugged sheepishly and tapped a finger on his hearing aid. "Excuse me—just a moment." Removing the instrument from his ear, he began adjusting it.

"Remember Heather, you bastard?" Deane said.

Sakai shook his head and continued to try to regulate the hearing aid. Deane glanced over his shoulder and saw that the two women on the adjacent path were coming nearer—closer than he thought they would be.

"Never mind," he said, raising the gun so Sakai could see it. He jerked his head toward the river. "Move."

Sakai looked at him incredulously as he replaced the hearing aid in his ear. "What is this?"

"Judgment day, Captain. The day you pay for killing Heather. Now move."

Sakai's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

"Just *move*."

Suddenly a woman's voice called, "Hello!"

Deane tensed and looked over his shoulder to see the two women approaching. While he was looking, Sakai snatched the pistol from his hand. Deane jerked his head back, expecting to be shot. But Sakai merely held the gun and stared at him. "Now I know who you are," he said.

The two women walked up. One was young and one was older. The older woman looked at Deane in astonishment, her eyes fixing on his half-moon scar. *"Gunga?"*

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Deane's eyes widened in shock. "Heather? I thought you were dead."

He looked back at Sakai in time to see him slip the gun under the orchids in his wicker tray before either of the women could see it. Deane looked at Heather in bewilderment. "I saw him forcing you onto the motor launch."

Heather put a hand on his arm. "Kobe and I were running away together, Gunga. We knew we'd be separated if we didn't. I wanted to take you with us, your parents being dead and all, but I couldn't find you."

"I—was up in a tree."

"Finally the boat was ready to leave. I wanted to keep looking for you—Kobe had to drag me on board. Oh, Gunga, I'm sorry."

Deane half smiled. "Well, I'm glad you're not dead."

"I'm very much alive," Heather beamed. She took Sakai's hand. "We both are. And this, Gunga," she put her arm around the younger woman, "is our daughter. We named her Deana, after you."

"Deana?"

"Yes. After all, it was because of you that we got together."

Deane looked at the young woman. In her thirties, she was a stunning combination of her handsome parents. Holding out her hand, she said, "Hello. I've always wanted to meet the person I was named after."

"Well, I'm glad they didn't name you Gunga."

Heather laughed. "Come up to the house with us," she said, "so we can have tea and talk. Kobe, you can take the afternoon off, can't you? To visit with an old friend?"

"Of course." Sakai's eyes met Deane's and held for a moment.

"Let's take the river path," Heather said. "It's shorter."

They walked along the river, the four of them, until they came to a large plantation home with steps leading up to a verandah that was built out over the water. The women went up the steps first, and as the men prepared to follow Deane put his hand into the orchid tray Sakai was carrying, took the pistol from under the flowers, and reached down from the steps to let it slip soundlessly into the River Kwai.

"Q"

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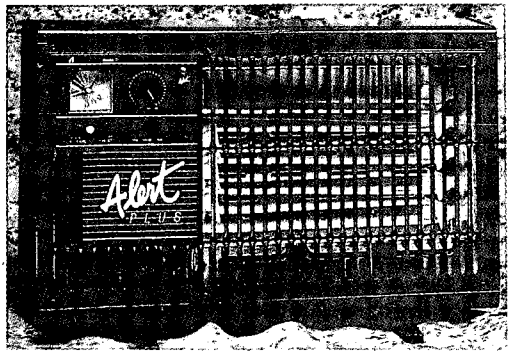

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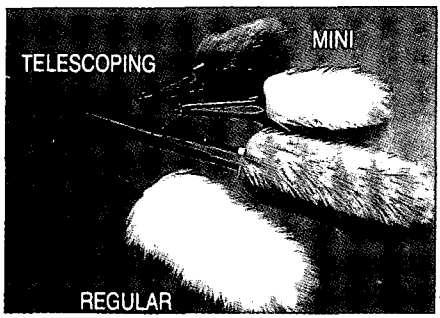

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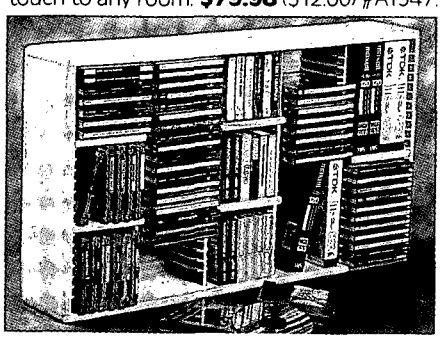

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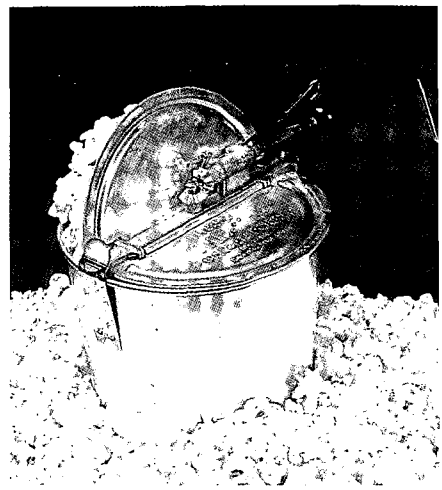

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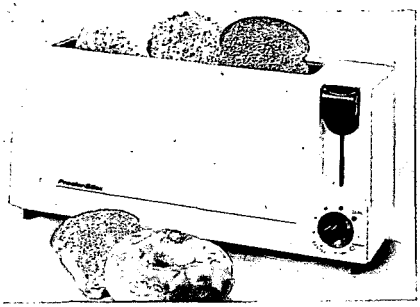

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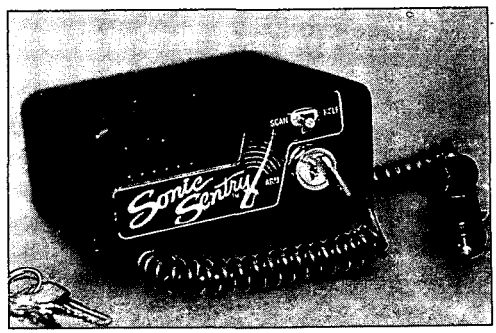

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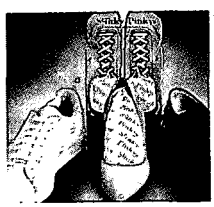

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